

IN THE DAYS OF THE COMET

TEN CENTS

NEW YEAR  
**COSMOPOLITAN**





## In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

*"The World's Great Age begins anew,  
The Golden Years return,  
The Earth doth like a Snake renew  
Her Winter Skin outworn;  
Heaven smiles, and Fables and prophecies gleam  
Like Wrecks of a Dying Dream."*

### PROLOGUE

#### THE MAN WHO WROTE IN THE TOWER

I saw a gray-haired man, a figure of hale age, sitting at a table and writing.

It seemed to be in a room in a tower, very high, so that through the tall windows on his left one perceived only distances, a remote horizon of sea, a headland, and that vague haze and glitter in the sunset that many miles away marks a city. All the appointed ments of the room were orderly and beautiful, and in some subtle quality, in this small difference and that, new to me and strange. They were in no fashion I could name, and the simple costumes the man wore suggested neither period nor country. It might, I thought, be the Happy Future or Utopia or the Land of Simple Dreams; an errant note of memory, Henry James's phrase and story of "The Great Good Place" twinkled across my mind and passed and left no light.

The man I saw wrote with a thing like a fountain-pen, a modern touch that prohibited any historical retrospection, and as he finished each sheet, writing in an easy, flowing hand, he added it to a growing pile upon a graceful little table under the window. His laid-down sheets lay loose, partly covering others that were clipped together into fascicles. Old as he certainly was, he wrote with a steady hand.

Clearly he was unaware of my presence, and I stood waiting until his pen should come to a pause.

I discovered that a massive spectacles hung dangling high over his head, a more

ment in this caught my attention sharply, and I looked up to see distorted and made fantastic, but bright and beautifully colored, the magnified, reflected, creative rendering of a palace, of a terrace, of the vista of a great roadway with many people, people exaggerated, impossible-looking because of the curvature of the mirror, going to and fro. I turned my head quickly, that I might see more clearly through the window behind me, but it was too high for me to survey this mirror across directly, and after a momentary pause I came back to that distorting mirror again.

But now the writer was leaning back in his chair. He put down his pen and sighed the half-mournful sigh—"Ah! you work, you! how you gently and the me!"—of a man who has been writing to his satisfaction.

"What is this place?" I asked, "and who are you?"

He looked round with the quick movement of surprise.

"What is this place?" I repeated, "and where am I?"

He regarded me steadily for a moment from under his wrinkled brows, and then his expression softened to a smile. He pointed to a chair beside the table. "I am writing," he said.

"About this?"

"About the Change."

I sat down. It was a very comfortable chair, and well placed under the light.

"If you would like to read—" he said.

I indicated the manuscript. "Then explain?" I asked.

"That explains," he answered.

He drew a fresh sheet of paper toward him as he looked at me.

I glanced from him about his apartment and back to the little table. A knuckle marked very distinctly "I" caught my attention, and I took it up. I smiled in his friendly eyes. "Very well," said I, suddenly at my ease, and he nodded and went on writing. And in a mood between confidence and curiosity, I began to read.

This is the story that happy, active-looking old man in that pleasant place had written.

## BOOK THE FIRST

### CHAPTER THE FIRST—GENT IN THE GLASS

#### I



HAVE not myself to write the story of the Great Change so far as it has affected my own life and the lives of one or two people closely connected with me, primarily to please myself.

Long ago, in my crude, unhappy youth, I conceived the dream of writing a book. To scribble secretly and dream of authorship was one of my chief alleviations, and I read with a sympathetic every every scrap I could get about the world of literature and the lives of literary people. It is something, even amidst this present happiness, to find leisure and opportunity to take up and partially realize these old and happy dreams. But that alone, in a world where so much of vivid and increasing interest presents itself to be done even by

an old man, would not, I think, suffice to set me at this desk. I find some such recapitulation of my past as this well-involvement, is becoming necessary to my own secure mental continuity. The passage of years brings a man at last to retrospection; at seventy-two one's youth is far more important than it was at forty. And I am out of touch with my youth. The old life seems so cut off from the new, so alien and so unreasonable, that at times I find it hardening upon the incredible. The days have gone, the buildings and places. I stopped dead the other day in my afternoon's walk across the moor, where once the dismal outskirts of Swarthington struggled toward Lark, and asked: "Was it here indeed that I crouched among the weeds and refuse and broken crockery, and loaded my revolvers, ready for murder? Did ever such a thing happen in my life? Was such a mood and thought and intention ever possible to me? Rather, how

not some queer nightmare splitt out of dreamland slipped a pseudo-memory into the records of my vanished life? There must be many alive still who have the same perplexities. And I think, too, that those who are now growing up to take our places in the great enterprise of mankind, will need many such narratives as mine for even the most partial conception of the old world of shadows that came before our day. It chanced that my case is fairly typical of the Change; I was caught midway on a gust of passion and a curious accident put me for a time in the very nucleus of the new order.

My memory takes me back across the interval of fifty years to a little ill-lit room with a sash-window open to a starry sky, and instantly there returns to me the characteristic smell of that room, the penetrating odor of an ill-tanned lamp burning cheap paraffin. Lighted by electricity had then been perfected for fifteen years, but still the larger portion of the world used these lamps. All this first scene will go, in my mind at least, to that olfactory accompaniment. That was the evening smell of the room. By day it had a more subtle aroma, a closeness, a peculiar sort of faint pangsency, that I associate—I know not why—with dust.

Let me describe this room to you in detail. It was perhaps eight feet by seven in area, and rather higher than either of these dimensions; the ceiling was of plaster, cracked and bulging in places, gray with the soot of the lamp, and in one place discolored by a stain of yellow and olive-green stains caused by the percolation of damp from above. The walls were covered with thin-colored paper upon which had been printed in oblique reticulation a crimson shape, something of the nature of a curly ostrich feather or an anemone-flower, that had in its less faded moments a sort of dingy gaiety. There were several big plaster-rimmed wounds in the floor, caused by Parkard's ineffectual attempts to get nails into the wall, whereby those might hang pictures. One nail had hit between two bricks and got loose, and from this depended, sustained a little insecurely by lumpy and knotted blind-cord, Parkard's hanging bookshelves, planks painted over with a trocely blue enamel, and further decorated by a fringe of picked American cloth insecurely fixed by tacks. Below

this was a little table that behaved with a morbid vindictiveness to any force that was thrust beneath it suddenly; it was covered with a cloth whose pattern of red and black had been rendered less monotonous by the accident of Parkard's venalish ink-bottle, and on it, *intensity* of the whole, stood and stank the lamp. This lamp, you must understand, was of some whitish translucent substance, that was neither china nor glass; it had a shade of the same substance, a shade that did not protect the eyes of a reader in any measure, and it seemed admirably adapted to bring into patless prominence the fact that after the lamp's trimming, dust and paraffin had been smeared over its exterior with a reckless generosity.

The uneven floor-boards of this apartment were covered with scratched enamel of a chocolate hue, on which a small island of frayed carpet dimly blossomed in the dust and shadows.

There was a very small grate, made of cast-iron in one piece and painted buff, and a still smaller midst of a cast-iron leader that confirmed the gray stone of the hearth. No fire was had, only a few scraps of torn paper and the bowl of a broken corn-cob pipe were visible behind the bars, and in the corner, and rather thrust away, was an angular Japanese coal-burn with a damaged hinge.

Parkard's truckle-bed hid its gray sheets beneath an old patch-work counterpane on one side of the room and veiled his books and machine ornaments; and invading the two corners of the window were an old walnut and the washstand-stand, on which were distributed the simple appliances of his toilet.

This washstand-stand had been made of deal by some one with an excess of turnery appliances in a hurry, who had tried to distract attention from the rough economies of his workmanship by an arresting ornamentation of knobs and knuts upon the joints and legs. Apparently the planks had then been placed in the hands of some person of infinite leisure equipped with a pot of ochraceous paint, varnish, and a set of flexible combs. This person had first painted the article, then, if lucky, smeared it with varnish, and then sat down to work with the combs to stroke and comb the varnish into a wiled imitation of the grain of some nightmare timber. The washstand-

ward so much had evidently had a prolonged career of violent use; had been clipped, kicked, splintered, punched, stained, scorched, hammered, discolored, damped and defiled; had met indeed with almost every possible adventure, except a conflagration or a scrubbing, until at last it had come to this high refuge of Parlow's attic to contain the simple requirements of Parlow's personal cleanliness. It is to be remarked that every drop of water Parlow used had to be carried by an unfortunate servant-girl—the "slavery," Parlow called her—up from the basement to the top of the house, and subsequently down again.

A chest, also singularly grained and streaked, of two large and two small drawers, held Parlow's reserve of garments, and pegs on the door carried his two hats and completed this inventory of a "bed-sitting room" as I knew it before the Change. But I had forgotten—there was also a chair with a "squab" that apologized inadequately for the defects of its cane seat. I forget that for the moment, because I was sitting on the chair on the occasion that best begins this story.

I have described Parlow's room with such particularity because it will help you to understand the key in which my earlier chapters are written, but you must not imagine that this singular equipment or the smell of the lamp engaged my attention at that time to the slightest degree. I took all this grimy surroundings as if it were the most natural and proper setting for existence imaginable. It was the world as I knew it. My mind was entirely occupied then by graver and innerer matters, and it is only now in the distant retrospect that I see these details of environment as being remarkable, as significant, as indeed obviously the outward visible manifestation of the old-world disorder in our hearts.

## II

Parlow stood at the open window, opera-glass in hand, and sought and found, and was uncertain about and lost again, the new comet.

I thought the comet no more than a nuisance then, because I wanted to talk of other matters. But Parlow was full of it. My head was hot, I was feverish with inter-

ling anxieties and bitterness, I wanted to open my heart to him—at least, I wanted to relieve my heart by some romantic rendering of my troubles—and I gave but little heed to the things he said me.

We were two youths much of an age together; Parlow was two and twenty, and eight months older than I. He was—I think his proper definition was "expressing clerk" to a little solicitor in Overtonville, while I was third in the office staff of Rawden's pet-bank in Clayton. We had met first in the "Puffblower" of the Young Men's Christian Association of Swathington; we had found we attended simultaneous classes in Overtonville, he in science and I in shorthand, and had started a practice of working home together, and so our friendship came into being (Swathington, Clayton and Overtonville are contiguous towns, I should mention, in the great industrial area of the Midlands). We had shared each other's secret of religious doubt, we had confided to each other a common interest in socialism, he had come twice to supper at my mother's on a Sunday night, and I was free of his apartment. He was then a tall, flower-haired, gawky youth, with a disproportionate development of neck and wrist, and capable of vast enthusiasm; he gave two evenings a week to the evening classes of the organized scienceschool in Overtonville, where physiognomy was his favorite subject; and through this insidious opening of his mind, the wonder of outer space had come to take possession of his soul. He had commandeered an old opera-glass from his uncle who farmed at Leot over the moors, he had bought a cheap paper planetarium and Whitaker's almanac, and for a few days and moonlight was more than blank interruptions to the one satisfactory reality in his life—star-gazing. It was the depths that had seized him, the immensity, and the mysterious possibilities that might flow unto in that unplumbed abyss. With infinite labor, and the help of a very precise article in "The heavens," a little monthly magazine that catered for those who were under this obsession, he had at last got his opera-glass upon the new visitor to our system from outer space. He gazed in a sort of rapture upon that quivering little wedge of light among the shining pin-points—and gazed. My troubles had to wait for him.

"Wonderful," he sighed, and then, as

though his first emphasis did not satisfy her—"wonderful!"

He turned to me. "Wouldn't you like to see?"

I had to look, and then I had to listen, how that this scarcely visible intruder was to be, was presently to be, one of the largest comets this world has ever seen; how that its course must bring it within at most—so many scores of millions of miles from the earth (a mere step, Parolou seemed to think that); how that the spectroscope was already sounding its chemical secrets, perplexed by an unprecedented band in the green; how it was even now being photographed in the very act of unraveling—in an unusual direction—a sunward tail (which presently it wound up again); and all the while, in a sort of anticlimax, I was thinking, first of Nettie Stuart and the letter she had just written me, and then of old Rawdon's detestable face as I had seen it that afternoon. Now I planned answers to Nettie, and now belated reports to my employer, and then again "Nettie" was blazing all across the background of my thoughts.

Nettie Stuart was daughter of the head gardener of the rich Mr. Verrall's widow, and she said I had kissed and become overfamiliar before we were eighteen years old. My mother and hers were second cousins and old schoolfellows, and though my mother had been widowed untimely by a train accident and had been reduced to letting lodgings (she was the Clayton curate's landlady), a fraction estimated much lower than that of Mrs. Stuart, a kindly custom of occasional visits to the gardener's cottage at Churchhill Towers still kept the friends in touch. Commonly I went with her. And I remember it was in the dusk of one bright evening in July, one of those long golden evenings which do not so much give way to night as admit at last upon courtesy the moon and a choice retinue of stars, that Nettie and I, at the pond of goldfish where the vine-bordered walks converge, made our shy beginning. Now I remember still—something will always stay in me as *that* memory—the momentous emotion of that adventure. Nettie was dressed in white, her hair was off in waves of soft darkness from above her dark, shining eyes, and there was a little necklace of pearls about her smooth necked neck, and a little coin of gold that

rested in her throat. I kissed her half-reluctant lips, and for those years of my life thereafter—say! I almost think for all the rest of her life and mine—I could have died for her sake.

You must understand—and every year it becomes increasingly difficult to understand—how entirely different the world was then from what it is now. It was a dark world; it was full of preventable disaster, preventable diseases and preventable pain, of harshness, of a usage universal, pitiless and stupid unpremeditated cruelties, but yet, it may be even by virtue of the general darkness, there were moments of a rare and innocent beauty that seem no longer possible in my experience. The Great Change has come forevermore, happiness and beauty are our atmosphere, there is peace on earth and good will to all men, none would dare to dream of returning to the sorrows of the former time, and yet that misery was pierced, ever and again its gray curtain was stabbed through and through, by joys of an intensity, by perceptions of a keenness, that it seems to me are now altogether gone out of life. Is it the Change, I wonder, that has robbed life of its extremes, or is it perhaps only this, that youth has left me—even the strength of the middle years leaves me now—and takes its despair and captures, leaving me judgment perhaps, sympathy, memories—?

I cannot tell. One would need to be young now, and to have been young then as well, to decide that impossible problem.

Perhaps a cool observer even in the old days would have found little beauty in our grouping. I have our two photographs at hand in this bureau as I write, and they show a gawky youth in ill-fitting, ready-made clothing, and Nettie—looked, Nettie is badly dressed, and her attitude is more than a little stiff, but I can see her through the picture, and her living brightness, and something of that mystery of charm she had for me, come back again to my mind.

The reality of beauty yields itself to no words. I wish that I had the inner art and could draw in my margin something that escapes description. There was a sort of gawdy in her eyes. There was something a matter of the remotest difference, about her upper lip, so that her mouth closed

sweetly and broke very sweetly to a smile. That grave, sweet smile!

After we had kissed and decided not to tell our parents for a while of the irrevocable choice we had made, the time came for us to part, shyly and before others, and my mother and I went off back across the moorland path—the bracken-thickets rustling with startled deer—to the railway-station at Cheshill and so to our dingy basement in Clayton, and I saw no more of Nettie—except that I saw her in my thoughts—for nearly a year. But at our next meeting it was decided we must correspond, and this we did with much elaboration of secrecy, for Nettie would have no one at home, not even her only sister, know of her attachment. So I had to send my precious documents sealed and under cover by way of a confidential schoolfellow of hers who lived near London.

Our correspondence began our estrangement, because for the first time we came into more than sensitive contact and our minds sought expression.

Now you must understand that the world of thought in those days was in the strangest condition; it was choked with obsolete, inadequate formulae, it was tortuous to a maudlin degree with secondary contrivances and adaptations, suppressions, conventions and subterfuges. Rare immediacies faded the truth on any man's lips. I was brought up by my mother in a quaint, old-fashioned, narrow faith in certain religious formulae, certain rules of conduct, certain conceptions of social and political order, that had no more relevance to the realities and needs of every-day contemporary life than if they were clean linen that had been put away with lavender in a drawer. Indeed, her religion did actually smell of lavender; on Sundays she put away all the things of reality, the garments and even the furnishings of every-day, hid her hands, that were gnarled and sometimes chapped with scrubbing, in carefully mended black gloves, anointed her old black silk dress and bonnet, and took me, un-naturally clean and sweet also, to church. There we sang and bowed and heard sonorous prayers and joined in unsonorous responses, and rose with a congregational sigh refreshed and relieved when the doxology with its opening "Now to God the Father, God the Son," bowed out the same, brief sermon. There was a hall in

that religion of my mother's, a red-haired hell of curly flames that had once been very terrible; we were expected to believe that most of our poor unhappy world was to atone for its muddle and trouble here by suffering exquisite torments here-or-after, world without end, Amen. But indeed those curly flames looked rather jolly. The whole thing had been enlabeled and faded into a gentle unreality long before my time; if it had much terror even in my childhood, I have forgotten that; it was not so terrible as the Giant who was killed by the Beanstalk; and I see it all now as a setting for my poor old mother's worn and glum face, and almost lovingly as a part of her. And Mr. Gibbins, our plump little lodger, strangely transformed in his vestments and lifting his voice manfully to the quality of those Elizabethan prayers, seemed, I think, to give her a special and peculiar interest with God. She radiated her own tremulous gentleness upon Him, and redemmed Him from all the implications of vindictive theologians; she was in truth, had I but perceived it, the effectual answer to all she would have taught me.

Mr. Gibbins, you see, did sometimes, as the phrase went, "take notice" of me. He had induced me to go on reading after I left school; and, with the best intentions in the world, and to anticipate the poison of the times, he had lent me Barthe's "*Seigniorism Annotated*," and drawn my attention to the library of the Institute in Clayton.

The excellent Barthe was a great shock to me; it seemed clear from his answers to the skeptic that the case for doctrinal orthodoxy and all that faded and by no means awful heresies, which I had hitherto accepted as I accepted the sun, was an extremely poor one, and to hammer home that idea, the first book I got from the Institute happened to be an American edition of the collected works of Shelley, his gassy prose as well as his atmospheric verse. I was soon ripe for blindest infidelity. And at the Young Men's Christian Association I presently made the acquaintance of Purdon, who told me under promise of the most sinister secrecy that he was "a socialist out and out." He lent me several copies of a pamphlet with the flamant title of "*The Charbon*," which was just taking up a crusade against the scriptural

religion. The adolescent years of any fairly intelligent youth lie open, and will always be healthily open, to the contagion of philosophical doubts, of scraps and new ideas, and I will confess I had the fever of that phase badly. Doubt, I say, but it was not so much doubt—which is a complex thing—as startled, emphatic denial. "Have I believed this?" And I was also, you must remember, just commencing letters to Nettie.

We live now in these days when the Great Change has been in most things accomplished, in a time when everyone is being educated to a sort of intellectual gentleness, a gentleness that abates nothing from our vigor, and it is hard to understand the mild and struggling manner in which my generation of common young men did its thinking. To think at all about certain questions was an act of rebellion that set one oscillating between the furive and the defave. People begin to find Shelley—for all his melody—noby and ill-conditioned now, because his Anarcha have vanished, yet there was a time when novel thought had to go to that tune of breaking glass. It becomes a little difficult to imagine the yeasty state of mind, the disposition to shout and say Yahi! at constituted authority, to sustain a persistent note of provocation, such as we now youngsters displayed. I began to read with avidity such writings as Carlyle, Browning and Heine have left for the perplexity of posterity, and not only to read and admire but to imitate. My letters to Nettie, after one or two genuinely intended displays of perfunctory tenderness, broke out toward theology, sociology and the essence in rugged and startling expressions. No doubt they puzzled her extremely.

I retain the keenest sympathy, and something inexplicably near to envy, for my own departed youth, but I should find it difficult to maintain my case against anyone who would condemn me altogether as having been a very silly, posturing, emotional hobblerboy indeed, and quite like my faded photograph. And when I try to recall what exactly must have been the quality and tenor of my more sustained efforts to write reasonably to my sweetheart, I confess I shiver. . . . Yet I wish they were not all destroyed.

Her letters to me were simple enough, written in a roundish, unforsed hand, and

badly planned. Her first two or three showed a shy pleasure in the use of the word "dear"; and I remember being first puzzled and then, when I understood, delighted, because she had written "Willie outlive" under my name. "Arthur," I gathered, meant "darling." But when the evidences of my lamentation began, her answers were less happy.

I will not weary you with the story of how we quarreled in our silly youthful way, and how I went the next holiday, all untrained, to Checkball and made it worse, and how afterward I wrote a letter that she thought was "lovely" and mended the matter. Nor will I tell of all our subsequent fluctuations of misunderstanding. Always I was the offender and the final penitent, until this last trouble that was now beginning; and in between we had some tender new moments and I loved her very greatly. There was this mistake in the business, that in the darkness and alone I thought with great intensity of her, of her gaze, of her touch, of her sweet, delightful presence, but when I sat down to write I thought of Shelley and Burns and myself and other such irrelevant matters. When one is in love in this fermenting way, it is harder to make love than it is when one does not love at all. And as for Nettie, she loved, I know, not me, but those gentle mysticism. It was not my voice should come her dreams to passion. . . . So our letters continued to jar. Then suddenly she wrote me one doubting whether she could ever care for anyone who was a socialist and did not believe in the church; and then, hard upon it, came another note with unexpected novelties of phrasing. She thought we were not suited to each other; we differed so in tastes and ideas; she had long thought of releasing me from our engagement. In fact, though I really did not apprehend it fully at the first shock, I was dismissed. Her letter had reached me when I came home after old Rawdon's name too civil refusal to raise my wages. On this particular evening of which I write, therefore, I was in a state of feverish adjustment to two new and amazing, two nearly overwhelming, facts, that I was indispensable neither to Nettie nor at Rawdon's. And to talk of cerebral

Where did I stand?

I had grown so accustomed to think of





THE MAN WHO WROTE IN THE TOWER

Norrie as inseparably mine—the whole tradition of "true love" pointed me to that—that for her to face about with those precise small phrases toward abandonment, after we had kissed and whispered and come so close in the little adolescent familiarities of the young, shocked me profoundly. If I, Al, Rawdon didn't find me indispensable, either. I felt I was suddenly repudiated by the universe and threatened with effacement; that in some positive and emphatic way I must at once assert myself.

Should I fling up Rawdon's place at once, and then, in some extraordinarily subtle manner, make the fortune of Frohisher's adjacent and closely competitive pot-bank?

The first part of that programme, at any rate, would be easy of accomplishment—to go to Rawdon and say, "You will hear from me again"—but for the rest, Frohisher might tell me. That, however, was a secondary issue. The predominant affair was with Norrie. I found my mind thick-shot with flying fragments of rhetoric that might be of service in the letter I would write her. Scorn, irony, tenderness—what was it to be?

"Bother!" said Parload suddenly.

"What?" said I.

"They're lifting up at Bladden's iron-works, and the smoke comes right across my bit of sky."

The interruption came just as I was ripe to discharge my thoughts upon him.

"Parload," said I, "very likely I shall have to leave all this. Old Rawdon won't give me a rise in my wages, and after having asked I don't think I can stand going on upon the old terms any more. See? So I may have to clear out of Clayton for good and all."

### III

That made Parload put down the opera glass and look at me.

"It's a bad time to change just now," he said, after a little pause.

Rawdon had said as much, in a less agreeable tone.

But with Parload I felt always a disposition to the heroic note. "I've tried," I said, "of wandering idly after other men. One may as well starve one's body out of a place as starve one's soul in one."

"I don't know about that altogether," began Parload, slowly.

And with that we began one of our interminable conversations, one of those long, wandering, intensely generalized, diffusely personal talks that will be dear to the hearts of intelligent youths until the world comes to an end.

It would be an incredible test of memory for me now to recall all that meandering haze of talk; indeed, I recall scarcely any of it, though its circumstances and atmosphere stand out, a sharp, clear picture in my mind. I posed after my manner, and behaved very foolishly, no doubt, a wounded, smarting egotist, and Parload played his part of the philosopher preoccupied with the deeps.

We were presently strolling, walking through the warm summer's night and talking all the more freely for that. But one thing that I and I can remember. "I wish at times," said I, with a gesture at the heavens, "that some of you or some such thing would indeed stir this world and wipe us all away—sifters, wars, tumults, loves, jealousies, and all the wearisomeness of life."

"Ah!" said Parload, and the thought seemed to hang about him.

"It could only add to the miseries of life," he said irreverently, when presently I was theorizing of other things.

"What would?"

"Collision with a comet. It would only throw things back. It would only make what was left of life more savage than it is at present."

"But why should anything be left of life?" said I.

That was our walk, you know, and meanwhile we walked together up the narrow street outside his lodging, up the stairway and the lanes toward Clayton Crest and the highway.

We crossed a longer street, up which a clumsy steam-train, vomiting smoke and sparks, made its clattering way, and down which one saw the grimy brilliance of shop-fronts and the nocturnal flare of buskers dripping fire into the night. A busy movement of people ranged along that road, and we heard the voice of an itinerant preacher from a waste place between the houses. You cannot see these things as I can see them, nor can you figure—unless you know the pictures that great artist Hyde



Illustration by J. J. Jones

THIS WAS THE SCENE OF MANY A TALK WE TWO HAD HELD TOGETHER.

has left the world—the effect of the great banding by which we passed, lit below by a gaslamp and towering up to a scuttin sharp black edge against the polluted sky.

Those bandings? They were the bright-colored things in all that vanished world. Upon them, in successive layers of paste and paper, all the rough enterprises of that time joined in chaotic discord—gill-readers and preachers, theaters and churches, marvellous soaps and astonishing pickles, typewriting machines and sewing machines, mingled in a sort of visualized chaos! And passing that there was a muddy haze of cinders, a haze without a light, that used its many possibilities to burn a scar or so from the sky. We splashed along unheeding as we talked. Then across the altitudes, a wilderness of cottages and odd-looking sheds, past a great abandoned factory, and so to the highway. The highway ascended in a curve past a few dwellings and a barn-house or so, and round until all the valley in which four industrial towns lay crowded and confluent was overlooked.

I will admit that with the twilight there came a spell of weird magnificence over all that had, and brooded as it went down. The horrible minutiae of its details was veiled—the hatches that were houses, the bristling multitudes of chimneys, the ugly patches of unweeding vegetation amidst the make-shift fences of barrel-staves and wire. The rusty scars that framed the opposite ridges where the iron ore was taken, and the barren mountains of slag from the blast-furnaces, were veiled, the soot and boiling smoke and dust from foundry, pot-bank and furnace were transfigured and assimilated by the night. The dust-laden atmosphere that was a gray oppression through the day became at sundown a repository of deep maroonish colors, of blues and purples, of somber and vivid rubs, of strange, bright clearnesses of green and yellow against the darkening day. Each upstart furnace, when its research was laid gone, crowned itself with domes, the dark cinder-heaps began to glow with quivering fires and each pot-bank also squatted rebellious in a volcanic coronet of light. The empire of the day broke into a thousand feudal baronies of burning coal. The minor streets across the valley picked themselves out with gas lamps of lusty yellow,

that brightened and mingled at all the principal squares and crossings with the greenish paler of incandescent mantles and the high, cold glare of the electric arc. The intersecting railways lifted bright signal-boxes over their stations, and signal stars of red and green in rectangular constellations. The steam became fiery serpents breathing a lurid fire.

Moreover, high overhead, like things put out of reach and out of forgetion, Parliament had rediscovered a realm that was ruled by neither sun nor furnace—the universe of stars.

This was the scene of many a talk we two had held together. And if in the daytime we went right over the crest and looked westward, there was fireland, there were parks and great nurseries, the spine of a distant cathedrality, and sometimes, when the weather was near ruining, the crests of remote mountains hung clearly in the sky. Beyond the range of sight, indeed, our beyond, there was Checkshill; I felt it there always, and in the darkness more than I did by day. Checkshill and Nettie!

And to us two youngsters, as we walked along the under-path beside the rutted road and argued out our perplexities, it seemed that this ridge gave us comprehensively a view of our whole world.

There, on the one hand, in a crowded darkness, about the ugly factories and work-places, the workers banded together, ill clothed, ill nourished, ill taught, badly and expensively served at every occasion in life, uncertain even of their insufficient livelihood from day to day, the chapels and churches and public houses swelling up amidst their wretched homes like suppositories amidst a general corruption, and on the other hand, in space, freedom and dignity scores housing the fine cottages, as overcrowded as picturesque, in which the laborers fostered, lived the landlords and the masters who owned pot-bank and forge and farm and mine. Far away, distant, beautiful, irrelevant, from out of a little cluster of second-hand bookshops, ecclesiastical residences, and the ruin and undertone of a decaying market-town, the cathedral of Loughborough pointed a beautiful unemphatic spire to vague incredible skies. So it seemed to us the whole world was planned in those youthful first impressions.

(To be continued)



# In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

## BOOK THE FIRST—THE COMET

CHAPTER THE FIRST—BUT IN THE CHALLENGE—(continued)

**SUMMARY**—The narrator tells the story of the Great Change. When a young man becomes a clerk in a post-office in Clayton. He has been engaged to marry Nellie Brown, but the girl has broken with him on account of his materialism and religious doubt. Refused an increase of salary, he decides to give up his position. He takes his troubles to his friend Parkoid—a man of his own age and views. Parkoid has a taste for science, especially astronomy, and is deeply interested in a comet whose path threatens to approach the earth's orbit. The two friends climb a ridge whence they may view the comet, the town before them and the country beyond. Here they discuss the conditions under which they live.

### IV

**W**E saw everything simply, as young men will. We had our angry, confident solitudes, and whoever would offend them was a friend of the robbers. It was a clear case of robbery, we held—rich as there in those great houses lurked the Landlord and the Captain, with his scoundrel

the Lawyer, with his cheat the Priest, and so others were all the clothes of their deliberate villainies. No doubt they winked and chuckled over their rare wines, amidst their

laurels, wickedly dressed women, and plotted further grinding for the faces of the poor. And amidst all the squalor on the other hand, amidst brutality, ignorance and drunkenness, suffered meekly and patiently their blameless lives, the Working Men. And we, almost at the first glance, had found all this out, it had merely to be ascertained now with sufficient dexterity and schemeriness to change the face of the whole world. The Working Men would arise—in the form of a Labor Party, and with young men like Parkoid and myself to represent him—and come to his own, and then——?

Then the robbers would get it hot, and



Charles J. Smith, Jr.

I WAS A CLERK OF THE DISTRICT COURT, THEN THE SHERIFF OF CARROLL COUNTY IN HIS COURT



*Illustration by J. M. W. Turner.*

EVERYONE WAS DROVING FOR THE SAME PURPOSE AND THE SAME GOAL.

everything would be extremely satisfactory.

Unless my memory plays me strange tricks, this does not represent to the creed of thought and action that Farland and I held as the final result of human wisdom. We believed it with heat, and rejected with heat, the most obvious qualification of its baseness. At times, in our great talks, we were full of heady hopes for the near triumph of our doctrine; more often, our mood was hot resentment at the wickedness and stupidity that delayed so plain and simple a reconstruction of the order of the world. Then we grew malignant, and thought of barricades and significant violence. I was very bitter, I know, upon this night of which I am now particularly telling, and the only fact upon the hydra of Capitalism and Monopoly that I could see at all clearly, united exactly as old Rawdon had united when he refused to give me more than a paltry twenty shillings a week.

I wanted intensely to avenge my self-respect by some revenge upon him, and I felt that if that could be done by slaying the hydra, I might drag its carcass to the feet of Nellie and settle my other trouble as well. "What do you think of me now, Nellie?"

That, at any rate, came near enough to the quality of my thinking then, for you to imagine how I gesticulated and gestured to Farland that night. You figure as an idle black figure, unpossessing in the outline, set in the midst of that desolating night of flaring industrialism, and my idle voice with a rhetorical twang protesting, dissenting.

You will consider these notions of my youth poor, silly, violent stuff, particularly if you are of the younger generation born since the Change; you will be of that opinion. Nowadays when the whole world thinks clearly, thinks with deliberation, pellucid certainties, you find it impossible to imagine how any other thinking could have been possible. Let me tell you, then, how you can bring yourself to something like the condition of our former state. In the first place, you must get yourself out of health by unwise drinking and eating, and out of condition by neglecting your exercise; then you must contrive to be worried very much and made very anxious and uncomfortable, and then you must work

very hard for four or five days and for long hours every day at something too petty to be interesting, too complex to be mechanical, and without any personal significance to you whatever. This done, go straightway into a room that is not ventilated at all and that is closely full of foul air, and there set yourself to think out some very complicated problem. In a very little while you will find yourself in a state of intellectual muddle, unsteady, impatient, snatching at the obvious, presently choosing and rejecting conclusions haphazard. Try to play chess under such conditions, and you will play stupidly and lose your temper. Try to do anything that taxes brain or temper, and you will fail.

Now, the whole world before the Change was as sick and feverish as that; it was worried and overworked and plagued by problems that would not get stated simply, that offered and evaded solution; it was in an atmosphere that had corrupted and thickened past breathing; there was no thorough, cool thinking in the world as all. There was nothing in the mind of the world anywhere but half-truths, hasty assumptions, hallucinations and emotion. Nothing.

I know it seems incredible, and that already some of the younger men are beginning to doubt the greatness of the Change: our world has undergone, but read, read the newspapers of that time. Every age becomes misfigured and a little crazed in our minds as it recedes into the past. It is the part of those who, like myself, have stories of that time to tell, to supply, by a voracious spiritual realism, some antidote to that glamour.

## V

Always with Farland I was chief talker.

I can look back upon myself with, I believe, an almost perfect detachment. Things have so changed that, indeed, now I am another being, with scarcely anything in common with that beautiful, foolish youngster whose troubles I recall. I see him vulgarly theatrical, egotistical, insolent; indeed, I do not like him save with that instinctive maternal sympathy that is the draft of innocent infamy. Because he was myself, I may be able to feel and write understandingly about motives that



will put him out of sympathy with nearly every reader, but why should I palliate or defend his quality?

Always, I say, I did the talking, and it would have amazed me beyond measure if anyone had told me that mine was not the greater intelligence in those woody conversations. Parload was a quiet youth, and still and restrained in all things, while I had that supreme gift for young men and democracy, the gift of copious expression. Parload I diagnosed in my secret heart as a trifle dull. He posed as premissantly quiet, I thought, and was obscured by the common notion of "scientific caution." I did not remark that while my hands were chiefly useful for gestikulaton or holding a pen, Parload's hands could do all sorts of things, and I did not think, therefore, that fibers must run from those fingers to something in his brain. Nor, though I bragged perpetually of my short-hand, of my literature, of my indispensable share in Rawdon's business, did Parload lay stress on the comes and calulus he "mugged" in the organized science school. Parload is a famous man now, a great figure in a great time; his work upon intersecting radiations has broadened the intellectual horizon of mankind forever, and I, who am at best a brewer of intellectual wort, a drawer of living water, can smile, and he can smile, to think how I patronized and posed and jabbled over him in the darkness of those early days.

That night I was still and eloquent beyond measure. Rawdon was, of course, the hub upon which I went round—Rawdon, and the Rawdonianque employer, and the injustice of "wage-slavery" and all the immediate conditions of that industrial blind alley up which it seemed our lives were thrust. But ever and again I glanced at other things. Nettle was about, there in the background of my mind, regarding me enigmatically. It was part of my pose to Parload that I had a romantic, kerosaffin sensation about beyond the sphere of our intercourse, and that now gave a Byronic resonance to many of the controversial things I produced for his scratch-mart.

I will not weary you with too detailed an account of the talk of a foolish youth who was also drawn-out and unhappy, and whose voice was hush for the humiliated that remained in his eyes. Indeed, now, in

many particulars, I cannot disentangle this baroque of which I tell from many of the things I may have said in other talks to Parload. For example, I forget if it was then or before or afterward that, as it were by accident, I let out what might be taken as an admission that I was addicted to drugs.

"You shouldn't do that," said Parload suddenly. "It won't do to poison your brain with that."

My brain, my eloquence, were to be very important assets to our party in the coming revolution.

But one thing does clearly belong to this particular conversation I am recalling. When I started out, it was quite settled in the back of my mind that I must not leave Rawdon's. I simply wanted to abuse my employer to Parload. But I talked so well quite out of touch with all the cogent reasons there were for sticking to my place, and I got home that night irretrievably committed to a spirited—not to say a defiant—policy with my employer.

"I can't stand Rawdon's much longer," I said to Parload by way of a flourish.

"There's hard times coming," said Parload.

"Next winter?"

"Sooner. The Americans have been overproducing and they mean to dump. The iron trade is going to have convulsions."

"I don't care. Pot-burners are steady."

"With a corner in horses? No, I've heard——"

"What have you heard?"

"Oiler secrets. But it's no secret there's trouble coming to pot-burners. There's been borrowing and speculation. The owners don't stick to one business as they used to do. I can tell that much. Half the culver was be 'playing' before two months are out." Parload delivered himself of this unusually long speech in his most pithy and weighty manner.

"Playing" was our local euphemism for a time when there was no work and no money for a man, a time of stagnation and misery, hunger leading day after day. Such interludes seemed in those days a necessary consequence of industrial organization.

"You'd better stick to Rawdon's," said Parload.

"Ugh!" said I, affixing a noble disgust.

"There'll be trouble," said Farland.

"Who cares?" said I. "Let them be trouble—the more the better. This system has got to end, sooner or later. These capitalists with their speculation and concerns and trusts make things go from bad to worse. Why should I cover in Reverend's office, like a frightened dog, while hunger walks the streets? Hunger is the master revolutionary. When he comes, we ought to turn out and salute him. I'm going to do so now."

"That's all very well," began Farland.

"I'm tired of it," I said. "I want to come to grips with all these Reverends. I think perhaps if I was hungry and savage I could talk to hungry men——"

"There's your mother," said Farland in his slow, judicial way.

That was a difficulty.

I got over it by a rhetorical turn. "Why should one sacrifice the future of the world—why should one even sacrifice one's own future—because one's mother is totally destitute of imagination?"

### V

It was late when I parted from Farland and came back to my own home.

Our house stood in a highly respectable little square near the Clayton parish church. Mr. Gabbins, the curate of all-works, lodged on our ground floor, and upstairs there was an old lady, Miss Holroyd, who painted flowers on china and maintained her third sister in an adjacent room; my mother and I lived in the basement and slept in the attic. The front of the house was walled by a Virginia creeper that defied the Clayton air and clustered in solidly dependent masses over the wicketed porch.

As I came up the steps, I had a glimpse of Mr. Gabbins working over his negatives by candle-light in his room. It was the chief delight of his little life to spend his holiday abroad in the company of a queer little snap-shot camera, and to return with a great multitude of fuzzy and sinister negatives that he had made in beautiful and interesting places. He would spend his evenings the year through in printing boxes there in order to inflict copies upon his un-derriving friends. There was a long trestle of his work in the Clayton National School, for example, inscribed in

old English lettering, "Haines Travel Pictures by the Rev. E. H. Gabbins." For this, it seemed, he lived and travelled and had his being. It was his only real joy. By his shaded light I could see his sharp little nose, his little pale eyes behind his glasses, his mouth pursed up with the endeavor of his employment.

"Hiring her," I muttered, for was not he also part of the system, part of the scheme of robbery that made wage-work of Farland and me?—though his share in the proceeds were certainly small.

"Hiring her," said I, standing in the darkness, outside even his faint glow of traveled culture.

My mother let me in.

She looked at me, steadily, because she knew there was something wrong and that it was no use for her to ask what.

"Good night, nursery," said I, and kissed her a little roughly, and lit and took my candle and went off at once up the staircase to bed—not looking back at her.

"I've kept some supper for you, dear."

"Don't want any supper."

"But, dearie——"

"Good night, mother," said I and went up and slammed my door upon her, blew out my candle and lay down at once upon my bed, and lay there a long time before I got up to undress.

There were times when that dumb beseeching of my mother's face irritated me unspeakably. It did so that night. I felt I had to struggle against it, that I could not resist if I gave way to its pleading, and it hurt me and divided me to resist it almost beyond endurance. It was clear to me that I had to think out for myself religious problems, social problems, questions of conduct, questions of expediency; that her poor dear simple beliefs could not help me at all—and she did not understand! Here was the accepted religion, her only social ideas were hard subscriptions to the accepted order, to laws, to doctors, clergymen, lawyers, masters and all respectable persons in authority over us, and with her, no believe was to fear. She knew from a thousand little signs—though still at times I went to church with her—that I was passing out of touch of all these things that ruled her life, into some terrible unknown. From things I said she could infer such clumsy conclusions as I made. She felt my socialism, felt my spirit in revolt

against the accepted order, felt the impotent resentments that filled me with bitterness against all she held sacred. Yet, you know, it was not her dear gods she sought to defend so much as me! She seemed always to be wanting to say to me: "Dear, I know it's hard—but revolt is harder. Don't make war on it, dear—don't! Don't do anything to offend it. I'm sure it will hurt you if you do—it will hurt you if you do."

She had been cured into submission, as so many women of that time had been, by the sheer brutality of the accepted thing. The existing order dominated her into a worship of abject observance. It had beat her, aged her, rubbed her of spontaneity so that at fifty-five she peered through cheap spectacles at my face and saw it only dimly, filled her with a habit of anxiety, made her hands—— Her poor dear hands! Not in the whole world now could you find a woman with hands so grimy, so weather-worn, so misshapen by toil, so chapped and coarsened, so really thickened. . . . At my rate, there is this I can say for my self, that my bitterness against the world and fortune was for her sake as well as for my own.

Yet that night I pushed by her hands. I answered her curtly, and left her concerned and perplexed in the passage, and slammed my door upon her.

And for a long time I lay raging at the hardship and evil of life, at the contempt of Rawdon and the lawless coarseness of Nettie's letters, at my weakness and impotence, at the things I found intolerable and the things I could not mend. Over and over went my poor little brain, tired out and unable to stop on my treadmill of troubles. Nettie. Rawdon. My mother. Catherine. Nettie. . . .

Suddenly I came upon emotional exhaustion. Some clock was striking midnight. After all, I was young, I had those quick reactions. I remember quite distinctly that I stood up abruptly, undisturbed very quickly in the dark, and had hardly touched my pillow again before I was asleep.

But how my mother slept that night I do not know.

Oddly enough, I do not blame myself for behaving like this to my mother, though

my conscience blames me sorely for my arrogance to Parloard. I regret my behavior to my mother before the days of Change. It is a sore among my memories that will always be a little painful to the end of my days, but I do not see how something of the sort was to be escaped under those former conditions. In that time of mud and obscurity, people were overtaken by need and toil and hot passions before they had the chance of even a year or so of clear thinking, they settled down to an intense and strenuous application to some partial but immediate duty, and the growth of thought ceased in them.

They set and hardened into narrow ways. Few women remained capable of a new idea after five-and-twenty, few men after thirty-one or -two. Dissatisfied with the thing that existed was regarded as personal, it was certainly a consequence; and the only protest against it, the only effort against that universal tendency in all human institutions to thicken and clog, to work loosely and badly, to rust and weaken toward catastrophes, came from the young, the crude, unmerciful young. That seemed in those days to thoughtful men the harsh law of our being, either that we must submit to our elders and be stifled, or we must disregard them, disobey them, thrust them aside and make our little step of progress before we, too, ossified and became obstructive in our turn.

My pushing past my mother, my impetuous departure to my own silent meditations, was, I now perceive, a figure of the whole hard relationship between parents and sons in those days. There appeared no other way; that perpetually recurring tragedy was, it seemed, part of the very nature of the progress of the world. We did not think then that minds might grow ripe without growing rigid, or children honor their parents and still think for themselves. We were angry and hasty because we stifled in darkness, in a poisoned and vitiated air. That deliberate annihilation of the intelligence which is now the universal quality, that vigor with consideration, that judgment with confident enterprise, which show through all our world, were things disintegrated and unknown in the corrupting atmosphere of our former state.

(So the first handle ended. I put it aside and looked for the second.)

"Well?" said the man who wrote.

"This is fiction?"

"It's my story."

"But you? Aren't this beauty—You are not this ill-conditioned, squabbly-lired lad of whom I have been reading?"

He smiled. "There intervenes a certain Change," he said. "Have I not hinted as that?"

I hesitated upon a question, then saw the second fascicle at hand and picked it up.)

## CHAPTER THE SEIGTH—SEPTIE

### I



CANNOT now remember, the story resumed, what interval separated that evening on which Parload first showed me the comet—I think I only pretended to see it then—and the Sunday afternoon I spent at Chesham.

Between the two there was time enough for me to give notice and leave Rowdon's, to seek for some other situation very strenuously in vain, to think and say many hard and violent things to my mother and to Parload, and to pass through some phases of very profound wretchedness. There must have been a passionate correspondence with Nettle, but all the froth and fury of that has faded now out of my memory. All I have clear now is that I wrote one magnificent howl to her, casting her off forever, and getting in reply a plain little note to say that even if there was to be an end to everything, that was no excuse for writing such things as I had done; and then, I think, I wrote again as a man I considered inferior. To this she did not reply. That interval was at least three weeks, and probably four, because the comet which had been on the first occasion only a dubious speck in the sky, certainly visible only where it was magnified, was now a great white presence, brighter than Jupiter, and casting a shadow on its own account. It was now actively present in the world of human thought, everyone was talking about it, everyone was looking for its waning splendor as the sun went down, the papers, the moon-balls, the handbills, asked it.

Yes, the comet was already dominant before I went over to make everything clear to Nettle. And Parload had spent two hoarded pounds in buying himself a

spectroscope, so that he could see for himself, night after night, that mysterious, that strumming line—the unknown line in the green. How many times, I wonder, did I look at the anomaly, quivering symbol of the unknown things that were rushing upon us out of the infinite void, before I rebelled? But at last I could stand it no longer, and I reproached Parload very bitterly for wasting his time as an "astronomical dilettante."

"Here," said I, "we're on the verge of the biggest kickout in the history of this countryside, here's desire and hunger coming, here's all the capitalist competitive system like a wound inflamed, and you spend your time gazing at that damned silly streak of nothing in the sky!"

Parload stared at me. "Yes, I do," he said, slowly, as though it was a new idea. "Don't I? . . . I wonder why."

"I want to start meetings of an evening on Rowdon's Waste."

"You think they'd listen?"

"They'd listen last enough now."

"They didn't before," said Parload, looking at his pet instrument.

"There was a demonstration of unemployed at Swathingles on Sunday. They got to stone-throwing."

Parload said nothing for a little while, and I said several things. He seemed to be considering something.

"But, after all," he said at last, with an awkward movement toward his spectroscope, "that does signify something."

"The comet?"

"Yes."

"What can it signify? You don't want me to believe in astrology. What does it matter what flames on the horizon—when men are starving on earth?"

"It's—it's science."

"Science! What we want now is socialism—not science."

He still seemed reluctant to give up his coat.

"Socialism's all right," he said, "but if that thing up there were to hit the earth, it might matter."

"Nothing matters but human beings."

"Suppose it killed them all?"

"Oh!" said I, "that's not."

"I wonder," said Parkard, dreamily, "divided in his allegiance."

He looked at the sunset. He seemed on the verge of repeating his growing information about the narrowness of the paths of earth and comet, and all that might ensue from that. So I cut in with something I had got out of a new forgotten writer called Rankin, a volcano of beautiful language and miscegenous suggestions, who persuaded very greatly with eloquent, acceptable young men in those days. Something it was about the insignificance of science and the supreme importance of life. Parkard stood listening, half turned toward the sky, with the tips of his fingers on his spectroscope. He seemed to come to a sudden decision.

"No. I don't agree with you, Lord-fool," he said. "You don't understand about science."

Parkard never argued with that bluntness of opposition. "I was so used to active possibilities of our talk that his brief contradiction struck me like a blow." "Don't agree with me?" I repeated.

"No," said Parkard.

"But how?"

"I believe science is of more importance than socialism," he said. "Socialism's a theory. Science—science is something more."

And that was really all he seemed to be able to say.

We embarked upon one of those queer arguments ultimate young men used always to find so leading. Science or socialism? It was, of course, like arguing which is right, left-handedness or a taste for onions—it was an altogether impossible opposition. But the surge of my rhetoric enabled me at last to exasperate Parkard, and his mere repudiation of my conclusions suffered to exasperate me, and we ended in the key of a positive quarrel. "Oh, very well!" said I. "So long as I know where we are!"

I slammed his door as though I dy-

misled his house, and went rapping down the street, but I felt he was already back at the window watching his blessed line as the green before I got round the corner.

I had to walk for an hour or so before I was cool enough to go home.

And it was Parkard had first introduced me to socialism!

Recount!

The most extraordinary things used to run through my head in those wild days. I will confess that my mind ran persistently that evening upon revelations after the best French pattern, and I sat on a committee of safety and tried barabardiers. Parkard was there, among the prisoners, backsliders, sure, too late of the error of his ways. His hands were tied behind his back ready for the shambles; through the open door one heard the voice of justice, the rule justice of the people. I was sorry, but I had to do my duty.

"If we punish those who would betray us to kings," said I, with a sorrowful diffidence, "how much the more must we punish those who would give over the state to the pursuit of useless knowledge," and so with a gloomy satisfaction sent him off to the gallows.

"Ah, Parkard! Parkard! If only you'd listened to me earlier, Parkard!"

None the less, that quarrel made me extremely unhappy. Parkard was my only go-to, and it cost me much to keep away from him and think of him with no one to listen to me, coming after evening.

That was a very miserable time for me, even before my last visit to Checkshill. My long unemployed hours hung heavily on my hands. I kept away from home all day, partly to support a fiction that I was sedulously seeking another situation, and partly to escape the persistent question in my mother's eyes. "Why did you quarrel with Mr. Revidon? Why did you? Why do you keep on going about with a sulken face and risk offending it more?" I spent most of the morning in the newspaper-room of the public library, writing impossible applications for impossible posts. I remember that, among other things of that sort, I offered my services to a firm of private detectives, a sinister brood of traders upon base jealousies now happily vanished from the world, and wrote, *a paper of an advertisement for "detectives,"* that I did not know what the duties of a stercor-

might be, but that I was apt and willing to learn. And in the afternoon and evenings I wandered through the strange lights and shadows of my native valley and bared all crooked things. Until my wanderings were checked by the discovery that I was wearing out my boots.

The argument, inconclusive maledicta of that time!

I perceive I was an evil-tempered, ill-disposed youth with a great capacity for hatred, but—

There was an excuse for hate.

It was wrong of me to hate individuals—to be rude, harsh and vindictive to this person or that—but indeed it would have been equally wrong to have taken the manifest *offer* life made me without resentment. I see now clearly and calmly, what I then felt obscurely and with an unbalanced intensity, that my conditions were intolerable. My work was tedious and laborious, and it took up an unmeasurable proportion of my time; I was ill clothed, ill fed, ill housed, ill educated and ill trained, my will was suppressed and cramped to the pitch of torture; I had no reasonable pride in myself, and no reasonable chance of putting anything right. It was a life hardly worth living. That a large proportion of the people about had no better a lot, that many had a worse, does not affect these facts. It was a life in which contentment would have been diabolical. If some of them were contented or resigned, so much the worse for everyone. No doubt it was hasty and foolish of me to throw up my situation, but everything was so obviously sinister and foolish in our social organization that I do not feel disposed to blame myself even for that, except in so far as it pained my mother and caused her anxiety.

Think of the one comprehensive fact of the lockout!

That year was a bad year, a year of world-wide economic disorganization. Through their want of intelligent direction, the great "trust" of American ironmasters, a gang of energetic, narrow-minded furnace-owners, had smelted far more iron than the whole world had any demand for. (In those days there existed no means of estimating any need of that sort beforehand.) They had done this without even consulting the economists of any other country. During their period of activity

they had drawn into their employment a great number of workers, and had erected a huge productive plant. It is manifestly just that people who do handling stupid things of this sort should suffer, but in the old days it was quite possible, it was customary, for the real blunders in such disasters to stick nearly all the consequences of their incapacity. No one thought it wrong for a light-witted "captain of industry" who had led his workpeople into overproduction—into the disproportionate manufacture, that is to say, of some particular article—to abandon and dismiss them. Nor was there anything to prevent the sudden drastic underbidding of some trade rival in order to surprise and destroy his trade, secure his customers for one's own discarded needs, and shift a portion of one's purchases upon him. This operation of spasmodic underbidding was known as "dumping." The Americans ironmasters were now dumping on the British market. The British employers were, of course, taking their loss out of their workpeople as much as possible, but in addition they were agitating for some legislation that would prevent—not stupid relative excess in production, but "dumping"—not the disease, but the consequences of the disease. The necessary knowledge to prevent either dumping or its cause, the uncalculated production of commodities, did not exist, but this hardly weighed with them at all, and in response to their demands there had arisen a curious party of retaliatory-protectionists who combined vague proposals for spasmodic responses to these convulsive attacks from foreign manufacturers, with the very evident intention of achieving financial adventures. The dishonest and reckless element were, indeed, so evident in this movement as to add very greatly to the general atmosphere of distrust and insecurity, and in the recoil from the prospect of fiscal power in the hands of the class of men known as the "New Financiers" was heard frightened, old-fashioned statesmen suffering with passion that "dumping" didn't occur, or that it was a very charming sort of thing to happen. Nobody would face and handle the rather horrific truth of the business. The whole effect upon the mind of a cool observer was of a covey of unwholesome jabbering minds drifting over a series of irrational economic relationships, prices and employment tangled

about like towns in an earthquake, and amidst the shifting masses were the common workpeople going on with their lives as well as they could, suffering, perplexed, unorganized, and for anything but violent, fruitless protests, impotent. You cannot hope now to understand the infinite want of adjustment in the old order of things. At one time there were people dying of actual starvation in India while men were burning unsalable wheat in America. It sounds like the account of a particularly mad dream, does it not? It was a dream, a dream from which no one on earth escaped an awakening.

To us youngsters with the positivism, the idealism, of youth, it seemed that the strikes and lockouts, the superabundance and misery, could not possibly result simply from ignorance and want of thought and feeling. We needed more dramatic factors than these mental logs, these mere atmospheric clouds. We fled therefore to that common refuge of the unhappy ignorant, a belief in religions, intricate plots—we called them "plots"—against the poor.

You can still see how we figured it by looking up in any museum the caricatures of capital and labor that adorned the German and American socialist papers of the old time.

## II

I had cast Nettie off in an eloquent epistle, had really imagined the affair was over forever—"I've done with women," I said to Parkland—and then there was silence for more than a week.

Before that week was over, I was wondering with a growing emotion what next would happen between us.

I found my self thinking constantly of Nettie, picturing her—sometimes with stern conviction, sometimes with sympathetic remorse—mourning, regretting, realizing the absolute end that had come between us. At the bottom of my heart I no more believed that there was an end between us than that an end would come to the world. Had we not kissed each other, had we not achieved an atmosphere of whispering sweetness? Of course she was mine, of course I was hers, and separation and final quarrels and hardness and distance were no more than flourishes upon that eternal

fact. So at least I felt the thing, however I shaped my thought!

Whenever my imagination got to work as that week drew to its close, she came in as a matter of course; I thought of her recurrently all day and dreamed of her at night. On Saturday night I dreamed of her very vividly. In the morning I had a raging thirst to see her.

That Sunday, my mother wanted me to go to church very particularly. She had a double reason for that; she thought that it would certainly exercise a favorable influence upon my search for a situation throughout the next week, and in addition Mr. Cobbleton, with a certain mystery behind his glasses, had promised to see what he could do for me, and she wanted to keep him up to that promise. I half consented, and then my desire for Nettie took hold of me. I told my mother I wasn't going to church, and set off about eleven to walk the seven-mile walk to Chesham Hill.

I got some bread and cheese at a little inn upon the way, and was in Chesham Hill park somewhere about four, I did not go by the road past the house and so round to the gardens, but out over the road beyond the second keeper's cottage, along a path Nettie used to call her own. It was a mere deer-track. It led up a miniature valley and through a pretty dell in which we had been accustomed to meet, and so through the hollies and along a narrow path close by the wall of the shrubbery to the gardens.

In my memory, that walk through the park before I came upon Nettie stands out very vividly. The long tramp before it is foregrounded to a mere effect of dusty road and painful heat, but the broken valley and a sudden remark of doubt and unaccounted expectations that came to me, stands out now as something significant, as something unforgettable, something essential to the meaning of all that followed. Where should I meet her? What would she say? I had asked those questions before and found an answer. Now they came again, with a trail of fresh implications, and I had no answer for them at all. As I approached Nettie, she seemed to be the mere butt of my egotistical self-projection, the custodian of my actual grief, and drew together and became over and above this a personality of her own, a personality and a mystery, a sphere I had reached only to meet again.

I find a little difficulty in describing the quality of the old-world formalism so that it may be understandable now.

We young people had practically no preparation at all for the stir and emotions of adolescence. Toward the young the world maintained a conspiracy of stimulating silence. There came no initiation. There were books, stories of a curiously conventional kind that insisted on certain qualities in every love-affair and greatly intensified one's natural desire for them—perfect trust, perfect loyalty, lifelong devotion. Much of the complex essentials of love was altogether hidden. It was a dual system always in the old theory—a linking up that closed you both from almost all other intercourse. One read these things, got accidental glimpses of this and that, wondered and forgot, and so one grew.

Then strange emotions, novel alarming desires, dreams strongly charged with feeling, an inexplicable impulse of self-abandonment toward fire and pleasant strangers, began to trickle quietly amongst the familiar and purely egotistical and materialistic beliefs of boyhood and girlhood. We were like misbegotten monkeys who had clamped in the dry bed of a tropical river. Presently we were knee-deep and neck-deep in the flood. Our beings were suddenly going out from ourselves seeking the intimate being of others—we knew not why. This novel craving for abandonment to other personalities, and especially to those of the other sex, bore us away. We were ashamed, and full of desire. We kept the thing a guilty secret, and were resolved to satisfy it against all the world. In this state it was we drifted in the most accidental way against some other blindly seeking creature, and linked like magnet stones.

We were ashamed by the books we read, by all the talk that drifted about us touching us that once we had linked ourselves we were linked for life. Then afterward we discovered that other to whom we were linked was also an egoism, an individual thing of ideas and impulses.

So it was, I say, with the young of my class and most of the young people in our world. So it came about that I sought Nettie on the Sunday afternoon, and suddenly came upon her, light-headed, suddenly feminine, hand-eyed, with her soft,

sweet young face under the steady hair of her hat of straw, the pretty Venus I had resolved should be wholly mine.

There, all unconscious of me still, she stood, my essential feminine, the embodiment of the inner thing in life for me—and moreover to unknown others, a person like myself.

She held a little book in her hand, open as if she were walking along and reading it. That chance to be her pose, but indeed she was standing quite still, looking away toward the gray and lichens shrubby wall and, as I think now, listening.

### III

I recall with a vivid perception her queer start when she heard the rustle of my approaching foot, her surprise, her eyes almost of dismay for me. I could recollect, I believe, every significant word she spoke during our meeting, and most of what I said to her. At least, it seems I could, though indeed I may deceive myself. But I will not make the attempt. We were both too ill educated to speak our full meanings, we stamped out our intention with clumsy, stereotyped phrases, you who are better taught would fail to catch our intention. The effect would be usually. But our first words I may give you, because, though they conveyed nothing to me at the time, afterward they meant much.

"Yes, Willie!" she said.

"I have come," I said—forgetting in the instant all the elaborate things I had intended to say. "I thought I would surprise you—"

"Surprise me?"

"Yes."

She stared at me for a moment. I can see her pretty face now as it looked at me—her irresponsible dear face. She laughed a queer little laugh, and her other went for a moment, and then, as soon as she had spoken, came back again.

"Surprise me at what?" she said, with a rising note.

I was too intent to explain myself, to think of what might be in that.

"I wanted to tell you," I said, "that I didn't mean quite—the things I put in my letter."

(To be continued)

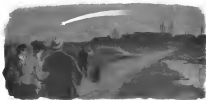




Illustration by Howard Chandler Christy

### THE BURNING OF LORD REEKS'S MOTOR

(See "In the Steps of the Consul," page 403)



## In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

### BOOK THE FIRST—THE COMET

#### CHAPTER THE SECOND—NETTIE—(CONTINUED)

**Synopsis.** The narrative tells the story of the Comet Change. When a young man he was a clerk in a garbageman in Chertsey. He is refused an increase in wages and given up his position. His intimate friend is a comedian. Perhaps, a man of his own age, who has besides a taste for women and is deeply concerned about a comet whose path is approaching the earth's orbit. Why continue to think about variations, he argues, when there is a possibility that the comet will kill the world? They are both in England, on account of overpopulation and the contents of American products in the English market. He dies and burials occur throughout the country. The narrator has been engaged to marry Nettie Wain, but the engagement has been broken on account of his condition and frightful death. However, he longs to see the girl again, and one morning afterwards arrives at her home in Chertsey.

#### IV

**W**HEN Nettie and I had been—er, we had been, just of an age and contemporaries altogether. Now we were a year and three quarters older, and she—her metamorphosis was almost complete, and I was still only at the beginning of a man's long solo career.

In an instant she grasped the situation. The hidden motives of her quick-eyed little mind flashed out their intuitive scheme of action. She treated me with that neat perfection of understanding a young woman has for a boy

"But how did you come?" she asked. I told her I had walked.

"Walked?" In an instant she was looking me over at the garden. I must be tired. I must come home with her at once and sit down. Indeed, it was near tea-time (she herself had tea at the old-fashioned house of five). Everyone would be so surprised to see me. Fancy walking! Fancy! But she supposed a man thought nothing of seventeen miles. When could I have started?

And all the while, by imperceptible maneuvers, keeping me at a distance, without even the touch of her hand.

"But, Nettie, I came over to talk to you!"

"My dear boy! The first, if you please! And besides—aren't we talking?"

The "dear boy" was a new coin, a dissonance, that sounded oddly to me.

She quickened her pace a little.

"I wanted to explain——" I began.

Whatever I wanted to explain, I had no chance to do so. I said a few discreet things, that she answered rather by her intonation than her words.

When we were well past the shrubbery, she slackened a little in her urgency, and so we came along the slope under the beeches to the garden. She kept her bright, straightforward-looking girlish eyes on me as we went; it seemed the delirium of all the time, but now I know, better than I did then, that every now and then she glanced over me and behind me toward the shrubbery. And all the while, behind her quick, breathless, incoherent talk, she was thinking.

Her dress marked the end of her transition.

Can I recall it?

Not, I am afraid, in the terms a woman would use. But her bright brown hair, which had once flowed down her back in a jolly pigtail tied with a bit of scarlet ribbon, was now caught up into an intricacy of pretty curves above her little ear and cheek and the soft, long lines of her neck; her white dress had descended to her legs; her slender waist, which had once been a mere geographical expression, an imaginary line like the equator, was now a thing of flexible beauty. A year ago she had been a pretty girl's face sticking out from a little unimportant frock that was carried upon an extremely active and efficient pair of brown-starched legs. Now there was coming a strange new body that flowed beneath her clothes with a sensuous confidence. Every movement, and particularly the novel droop of her hand and arm to the unaccustomed skirts she gathered about her, and a graceful, forward inclination that had come to her, called oddly to my eyes. A very fine word—I suppose you would call it a *seuil*—of green grass, that some new-wakened instinct had told her to fling about her shoulders, clung now closely to the young undulations of her body and now streamed flustering out for a moment in a breath of wind, and like some shy, independent tactician with a secret to impart, came into momentary contact with my arm.

She caught it back and reproved it.

We went through the green gate in the high garden wall. I held it open for her to pass through, for this was one of my restricted stock of stiff politenesses, and then for a second she was near touching me. So we came to the trim array of flower beds near the head gardener's cottage and the statue of "gloria" on our left. We walked between the box edgings and beds of begonias, and into the shadow of a yew hedge still but twenty yards of that very pond with the gullfish, at whose brim we had pledged our vows, and so we came to the winnow-smothered path.

The door was wide open and she walked in before me. "Come who has come to see us?" she cried.

Her father answered indifferently from the parlor, and a chair creaked. I judged he was disturbed in his nap.

"Mother!" she called in her clear, young voice. "Puss?"

Puss was her sister.

She told them, in a marveling key, that I had walked all the way from Clayton, and they gathered about me and echoed her notes of surprise.

"You'd better sit down, Willie," said her father, "now you have got here. How's your mother?"

He looked at me curiously as he spoke.

He was dressed in his Sunday clothes, a sort of lavender tweeds, but the waistcoat was unbuttoned for greater comfort in his slumbers. He was a brown-eyed, ruddy man, and I still have in my mind the bright effect of the red-golden hair that started out from his cheek to flow down into his beard. He was short but strongly built, and his beard and moustache were the biggest things about him. She had taken all the possibility of beauty he possessed, his clear skin, his bright hazel-brown eyes, and worked them to a certain spickiness she got from her mother. Her mother I remember as a sharp-eyed woman of great activity, she always seems to me now to have been bringing in or taking out meals, or doing some such service, and to me—for my mother's sake and my own—she was always welcoming and kind. Puss was a younger of fourteen, perhaps, of whom a hard, bright stare and a pale skin like her mother's are the chief traces on my memory. All these people were very kind to me always, and among them there was a common recognition, sometimes very



1 WAS STARTLED TO FIND MYSELF IN THE MIDDLE OF A CANYON



Drawn by Frank Leach

**KNOCK MY FIST WITH ALL MY STRENGTH AGAINST THE PANEL OF THE DOOR  
BEFORE ME**

agreedly finding expression, that I was—clever. They all stood about me as if they were a little at a loss.

"Sit down!" said her father. "Give him a chair, Foss."

We talked a little stiffly; they were all surprised by my sudden apposition, dancy, lugged and white-faced; but Nettie did not remain to keep the conversation going.

"There!" she cried suddenly, as if she were vexed. "I declare!" and she darted out of the room.

"Lord! what a girl it is!" said Mrs. Stuart. "I don't know what's come to her."

It was half an hour before Nettie came back. It seemed a long time to me, and yet she had been running, for when she came in again she was out of breath. In the meantime, I had thrown out casually that I had given up my place at Random's. "I can do better than that," I said.

"I left my book in the dell," she said, panting. "Is tea ready?" and that was her apology.

We didn't shake down into comfort even with the coming of the tea things. Tea at the gardener's cottage was a serious meal, with a big cake and little cakes, and preserves and fruit, a loaf spread upon a table. You must imagine me, silent, awkward and preoccupied, perplexed by the something that was inexplicably unexpected in Nettie, saying little and glowering across the cake at her, and all the discomfort I had been concentrating for the previous twenty-four hours suddenly lost somewhere in the back of my mind. Nettie's father tried to set me talking; he had a liking for my gift of ready speech, for his own ideas came with difficulty, and he was pleased to hear me pouring out my views. Indeed, over them I was, I think, even more talkative than with Furland, though to the world at large I was a shy young lion. "You ought to write it out for the newspaper," he used to say. "That's what you ought to do. I never heard such nonsense."

Or: "You've got the gift of the gab, young man. We ought to ha' made a lawyer of you."

But that afternoon, even in his eyes, I didn't shine. Failing every other stimulus, he reverted to my search for a situation, but even that did not engage me.

## V

For a long time I feared I should have to go back to Clayton without another word to Nettie. She seemed inaccessible to the need I felt for a talk with her, and I was thinking even of a sudden demand for that before them all. It was a transparent misnomer of her mother's, who had been watching my face, that sent us out at last together to do something—I forgot now what—in one of the greenhouses. Whatever that little mission may have been it was the merest, most banalized excuse, a door to shut, or a window to close, and I don't think it got done.

Nettie hesitated and obeyed. She led the way through one of the backhouses. It was a low, roomy, brick-floored alley between stables that had a close crowd of pots of fern, and behind big, branching plants that were spread and sailed overhead so as to make an imperious cover of leaves, and in that close, green privacy she stopped and turned on me suddenly like a creature at bay.

"Isn't the middle-class fern lovely?" she said, and looked at me with eyes that said, "Yes."

"Nettie," I began, "I was a fool to write to you as I did."

She started me by the assent that flashed out upon her face. But she said nothing, and stood waiting.

"Nettie," I planged, "I can't do without you. I—I love you."

"If you loved me," she said truthfully, watching the white fingers she planged among the green branches of a edgingella, "could you write the things you do to me?"

"I don't mean them," I said. "At least not always."

I thought really they were very good letters, and that Nettie was stupid to think otherwise, but I was for the moment clearly aware of the impossibility of concealing that to her.

"You wrote them."

"But then I jump seventeen miles to say I don't mean them."

"Yes. But perhaps you do."

I think I was at a loss; then I said, not very clearly, "I don't."

"You think you—you love me, Willie. But you don't."

"I do, Nettie! You know I do."

For answer she shook her head.

I made what I thought was a most heroic plunge. "Notre," I said, "I'd rather have you than—than my own opinion."

The scholastic still engaged her. "You think so now," she said.

I broke out into perspirations.

"No," she said shortly. "It's different now."

"But why should two letters make so much difference?" I said.

"It isn't only the letters. But it is a difference. It's different—for good."

She halted a little with that sentence seeking her expression. She looked up abruptly into my eyes and smiled, indeed slightly, but with the intimation that she thought our talk might end.

But I did not mean it to end like that.

"For good?" said I. "Not Notre, Notre! You don't mean that!"

"I do," she said deliberately, still looking at me, and with all her pose conveying her finality. She seemed to brace herself for the outbreak that must follow.

Of course I became wordy. But I did not submerge her. She stood extended, firing her counteractions like guns into my scattered, discursive attack. I remember that our talk took the absurd form of disputing whether I could be in love with her or not. And there was I, present in evidence, in a deepening and widening distress of soul because she could stand there, defensive, brighter and purer than ever and in some impenetrable way cut off from me and inaccessible.

You know we had never been together before without suspicion of endowment, without a fairly gaily, quite delightful coyness.

I pleaded, I argued. I tried to show that even my harsh and difficult letters came from my desire to come wholly into contact with her. I made suggested, less statements of the longing I felt for her when I was away, of the shock and misery of finding her estranged and cool. She looked at me, feeling the feeling of my speech and imperious to its ideas. I had no doubt—whatever poverty my words, coolly written down now, might convey—that I was eloquent then. I meant more intensely what I said, indeed I was wholly concentrated upon it. I was set upon outstripping to her with absolute sincerity my sense of distance, and the greatness of my desire. I talked toward her pain-

fully and obstinately through a jungle of words.

Her face changed very slowly—by such imperceptible degrees as when at dawn light comes into a clear sky. I could feel that I touched her, that her hardness was in some manner softening, her determination softening toward hesitations. The habit of an old hardness lurked somewhere within her. But she would not let me reach her.

"No," she cried abruptly, starting into motion.

She had a hand on my arm. A wonderful new friendliness came into her voice. "It's impossible. Well. Everything is different now—everything. We made a mistake. We two young ones made a mistake and everything is different however. Yes, yes."

She turned about.

"Notre!" cried I, and still protesting, pursued her along the narrow alley between it, staying toward the horseshoe door. I pursued her like an accusation, and she went before me like one who is guilty and ashamed. So I recall it now.

She would not let me talk to her again.

Yet I could see that my talk to her had altogether abolished the clear-cut distance of our meeting in the park. Ever and again I found her hand open upon me. They expressed something novel—a surprise, as though she realized an unexpected relationship, and a sympathetic pity. And still—something defensive.

When we got back to the cottage, I felt talking rather more freely with her father about the rationalization of railways, and my spirit and temper had so far mended as the realization that I could still produce an effect upon Notre, that I was even playful with Pam. Mrs. Stuart judged from that that things were better with me than they were, and began to beam slightly.

But Notre remained thoughtful and said very little. She was lost in perplexities I could not fathom, and presently she slipped away from us and went upstairs.

## VI

I was, of course, too lothsome to walk back to Chypton, but I had a shilling and a penny in my pocket for the train between Chypton and Two Mile Stone, and that

much of the distance I proposed to do in the train. And when I got ready to go, Nettie amazed me by waking up to the most remarkable solicitude for me. I meant, she said, go by the road. It was altogether too dark for the short way to the lodge gates.

I pointed out that it was moonlight. "With the comet thrown in," said old Stuart.

"No," she insisted, "you must go by the road."

I still disputed.

She was standing near me. "To please me," she urged, in a quick undertone, and with a persuasive look that pained me. Even in the moment I asked myself why should this please her?

I might have agreed had she not followed that up with "The hollies by the shrubbery are as dark as pitch. And there are the dew-bounds."

"I'm not afraid of the dark," said I.

"Not of the dew-bounds, either."

"But those dogs! Supposing one was loose?"

That was a girl's argument, a girl who still had to understand that fear is an overt argument only for her own sex. I thought too of those gridy, bark-brutes straining at their chains and of the chorus they could make of a night when they heard belated footsteps along the edge of the Killing Wood, and the thought inhibited my wish to please her. Like most imaginative natures I was acutely capable of dread and retreats, and constantly occupied with their suppression and concealment, and to refuse the short cut when it might appear that I did it on account of half a dozen almost certainly chained dogs, was impossible.

So I set off in spite of her, feeling valiant and glad to be so easily brave, but a little sorry that she should think herself crossed by me.

A thin cloud veiled the moon, and the way under the hedges was dark and indistinct. I was not so preoccupied with my love-affairs as to neglect what I will confess was always my custom at night across that wild and lonely park. I made myself a club by fastening a big flint to one end of my twisted handkerchief and tying the other about my wrist, and with this in my pocket, went on comforted.

And it chanced that, as I emerged from

the hollies by the corner of the shrubbery, I was startled to come unexpectedly upon a young man in evening dress smoking a cigar.

I was walking on fast, so that the sound I made was slight. He stood clear in the moonlight, his cigar glowed like a blood-red star, and it did not occur to me at the time that I advanced toward him almost inevitably in an impenetrable shadow.

"Hello!" he cried, with a sort of amiable challenge. "I'm here first!"

I came out into the light. "Who cares if you are?" said I.

I jumped at once to an interpretation of his words. I knew that there was an intermittent dispute between the house people and the village public about the use of this track, and it is needless to say where my sympathies fell in that dispute.

"Oh?" he cried in surprise.

"Thought I would run away, I suppose," said I, and came close up to him.

All my morose hatred of his class had flared up at the sight of his surname, at the fancied challenge of his words. I knew him. He was Edward Verrell, son of the man who owned not only this great estate but more than half of Rawdon's post-bank, and who had interests and possessions, collieries and rents, all over the district of the Four Towns. He was a gallant youngster, people said, and very clever. Young as he was there was talk of Parliament for him; he had been a great success at the university, and he was being sedulously popularized among us. He took with a light confidence, as a matter of course, advantages that I would have fired the rank to get, and I firmly believed myself a better man than he. He was, as he stood there, a concentrated figure of all that filled me with bitterness. One day he had stopped in a motor outside our house, and I remember the thrill of rage with which I had noted the doubtful admiration in my mother's eyes as she peered through her blind at him. "That's young Mr. Verrell," she said. "They say he's very clever."

"They would," I answered. "Damn them and him!"

But that is by the way.

He was clearly astonished to find himself face to face with a man. His nose changed. "Who the devil are you?" he asked.



"My retreat was the cheap expedient of re-acting. 'Who the devil are you?'"

"Well," he said.

"I'm coming along this path if I like," I said. "See? It's a public path—just as this used to be public land. You've stolen the land—you and yours, and now you want to avoid the right of way. You'll ask us to get off the face of the earth next. I shan't oblige. See?"

I was shorter and I suppose a couple of years younger than he, but I had the unprovoked cluck in my pocket gripped ready, and I would have fought with him very cheerfully. But he fell a step backward as I came towards him.

"Socialist, I presume?" he said, alert and quiet and with the faintest note of badinage.

"One of many."

"We're all socialists nowadays," he remarked philosophically, "and I haven't the faintest intention of disputing your right of way."

"You'd better not," I said.

"Not?"

"No."

He replaced his cigar, and there was a brief pause. "Catching a train?" he threw out.

It seemed absurd not to answer. "Yes," I said, shortly.

He said it was a pleasant evening for a walk.

I hovered for a moment, and there was my path before me, and he stood aside. There seemed nothing to do but to go on. "Good night," said he, as that attention took effect.

I groveled a rarely good night.

I felt like a hunchback of crossing that must presently burst with some violence as I went on my silent way. He had so completely got the best of our encounter.

### VII

There comes a memory, an odd intermixture of two entirely divergent things, that stand out with the intense vividness.

As I went across the last open meadow, following the short cut to Checkhill station, I perceived I had two shadows.

The thing jumped into my mind and stopped its tumult flow for a moment. I remember the intelligent detachment of my sudden interest. I turned sharply,

and stood looking at the moon and the great, white comet, that the drift of the clouds had now rather suddenly unveiled.

The comet was perhaps twenty degrees from the moon. What a wonderful thing it looked floating there, a greenish-white apparition in the dark-blue drap! It looked brighter than the moon because it was smaller, but the shadow it cast, though denser cut, was much fainter than the moon's shadow. I went on noting these facts, watching my two shadows precede me.

I am totally unable to account for the sequence of my thoughts on this occasion. But suddenly, as if I had come on this new last round a corner, the comet was out of my mind again, and I was face to face with an absolutely new idea. I wonder sometimes if the two shadows I cast, one with a sort of feminine fairness with regard to the other and not quite so tall, may not have suggested the word or the thought of an assignment to my mind. All I have clear is that with the multitude of intuition I knew what it was had brought the youth in evening dress outside the shrubbery. Of course! He had come to meet Nephel!

Once the mental process was started it took no time at all. The day which had been full of perplexities for me, the mysterious, invisible thing that had held Martin and myself apart, the unaccountable, strange something in her manner, was revealed and explained.

I knew now why she had looked guilty at my appearance, what had brought her out that afternoon, why she had hurried me in, the nature of the "hook" she had run back to fetch, the reason why she had wanted me to go back by the highway, and why she had tried me. It was all in the instant clear to me.

You must imagine me a black, little creature, suddenly stricken still—for a moment standing rigid—and then again suddenly becoming active with an important gesture, becoming audible with an inarticulate cry, with two little shadows marking my distress, and about this figure you must conceive a great wide space of moonlit grass, dimmed by the looming suggestion of distant trees—trees very low and faint and dim, and over it all the domed serenity of that wonderful, baroque night.

For a little while this realization stanned my mind. My thoughts came to a pause, staring at my discovery. Meanwhile my

feet and my previous direction carried me through the warm darkness to Chesham station with its little lights, to the foliaceous windows, and so to the train.

I remember myself, as it were, waking up to the thing—I was alone in one of the dingy third-class compartments of that train—and the sudden, nearly frantic, insurgence of my rage. I stood up with the cry of an angry animal, and smote my fist with all my strength against the panel of wood before me.

Curiously enough I have completely forgotten my mood after that for a little while, but I know that later, for a minute perhaps, I hung for a time out of the carriage with

the door open, contemplating a leap from the train. It was to be a dramatic leap, and then I would go storming back to bed, denounce her, overwhelm her; and I hung, urging myself to do it. I don't remember how it was I decided not to do this, at last, but in the end I didn't.

When the train stopped at the next station, I had given up all thoughts of going back. I was sitting in the corner of the carriage with my head and wounded hand pressed under my arm, and still insensible to its pain, trying to think out clearly a scheme of action—action that should express the monstrous indignation that possessed me.

#### CHAPTER XIX. THREE—THE REVOLVER.

##### I



HAT comet is going to hit the earth!"

So said one of the two men who got into the train and settled down.

"Ah!" said the other man.

"They do say it is made of gas, that comet. We shan't blow up, shall us?"

What did it matter to me?

I was thinking of revenge—revenge against the primary condition of my being. I was thinking of Nettie and her lover. I was firmly resolved he should not have her—though I had to kill them both to prevent it. I did not care what else might happen, if only that end were secured. All my thwarted passions had turned to rage. I would have accepted eternal torment that night without a second thought, to be certain of revenge. A hundred possibilities of action, a hundred stormy intentions, a whirl of violent schemes, chased one another through my shamed, exasperated mind. The sole prospect I could endure was of some gigantic, immeasurably cruel vindication of my humiliated will.

And Nettie? I loved Nettie still, but now with the intensest jealousy, with the keen, unmeasuring hatred of wounded pride and baffled, passionate desire.

##### II

As I came down the hill from Clapton Cross—for my shilling and a penny only

permitted my travelling by train as far as Two-Mile Stone, and thence I had to walk over the hill—I remember very vividly a little man with a shrill voice who was preaching under a gas lamp against a boarding to a thin crowd of Sunday evening lodgers. He was a short man, bald, with a little, fair, curly beard and hair and watery blue eyes, and he was preaching that the end of the world drew near.

I think that is the first time I heard any one link the comet with the end of the world. He had got that jumbled up with international politics and prophecies from the Book of Daniel.

I stopped to hear him only for a moment or so. I do not think I should have balked at all but his crowd blocked my path, and the sight of his queer, wild expressions, the gesture of his upward-pointing finger, held me.

"There is the end of all your sin and follies," he bawled. "There! There is the star of judgments, the judgments of the most High God! It is appointed unto all men to die—unto all men to die!"—his voice changed to a curious flat chant—"and after death, the judgment! The judgment!"

I pushed and threaded my way through the bystanders and went on, and his curious, harsh, flat voice pursued me. I went on with the thoughts that had occupied me before—where I could buy a revolver, and how I might master its use—and probably I should have forgotten all about him had he not taken a part in the hideous dream

that ended the little sleep I had that night. For the most part I lay awake thinking of Nettie and her lover.

Then came three strange days—three days that seem now to have been wholly contaminated upon one business.

That dominant business was the purchase of my revolver. I held myself resolutely to the idea that I must either restore myself by some extraordinary act of vigor and violence in Nettie's eyes or I must kill her. I would not let myself fall away from that. I felt that if I let this matter pass, my last shred of pride and honor would pass with it, that for the rest of my life I should never deserve the slightest respect or my woman's love. Pride kept me to my purpose between my parts of passion.

Yet it was not easy to buy that revolver.

I had a kind of shyness of the moment when I should have to face the shopman, and I was particularly anxious to have a surety ready if he should see fit to ask questions why I bought such a thing. I determined so say I was going to Texas, and I thought it might prove useful there. Texas, in those days, had the reputation of a wild, lawless land. As I knew nothing of caliber or impact, I wanted also to be able to ask with a steady face at what distance a man or woman could be killed by the weapon that might be offered me. I was pretty cool-headed in relation to such practical aspects of my affair. I had some little difficulty in finding a gunsmith. In Clayton there were some rock-shops and so forth in a cycle shop, but the only revolvers these people had impressed me as being too small and feeble for my purpose. It was in a pawnshop window on the narrow High Street of Swaththlingham that I found my chance, a reasonably clumsy and serious-looking implement dictated, "As used in the American strip."

I had drawn out my balance from the savings bank, a matter of two pounds and more, to make this purchase, and I found it at best a very easy transaction. The pawnbroker told me where I could get ammunition, and I went home that night with bulging pockets, an armed man.

The purchase of my revolver was, I say, the chief business of those days, but you must not think I was so intent upon it as to be insensible to the stirring things that were happening in the streets through which I went seeking the means to effect

my purpose. They were full of mourning, the whole region of the Four Towns sorrowed lowering from its narrow shores. The ordinary, healthy flow of people going to work, people going about their business, was chilled and checked. Numbers of men stood about the streets in knots and groups, so companies gather and catch in the bloodvessels in the opening stages of inflammation. The women looked haggard and worried. The workwomen had refused the proposed reduction of their wages, and the lock-out had begun. They were already at "play." The Conciliation Board was doing its best to keep the coal miners and masters from a breach, but young Lord Redcar, the greatest of our coal owners and landlord of all Swaththlingham and half Clayton, was taking a fine, up-standing attitude that made the breach inevitable. He was a handsome young man, a gallant young man, his pride revolted at the idea of being dictated to by a "lot of hally miners," and he meant, he said, to make a fight for it. The world had trusted him scrupulously from his earliest years, the shores in the common stock of five thousand people had gone to pay for his handsome upbringing, and large, romantic, expensive ambitions filled his generously nurtured mind. He had early distinguished himself at Oxford by his scornful attitude towards democracy. There was something that appealed to the imagination in his fine antagonism to the crowd—on the one hand, was the brilliant young nobleman, picturesquely alone, on the other, the ugly, unresponsive multitude, dressed insignificantly in shop clothes, under-educated, underfed, cynical, base, and with a wicked disinclination for work and a wicked appetite for the good things it could so surely get. For common imaginative purposes one left out the policeman from the design, the uniform policeman protecting his lordship, and ignored the fact that while Lord Redcar had his hands immediately and legally on the workmen's shelter and bread, they could reach him in the skin only by some violent breach of the law.

He lived at Lowchester House, five miles or so beyond Checkshill, but partly to show how little he cared for his antagonists, and partly no doubt to keep himself in touch with the negotiations that were still going on, he was visible almost every day in and

about the Four Towns, driving that big motor car of his that could take him sixty miles an hour. The English people for their play one might have thought selected work this bold procedure of my dangerous possibilities, but he did not go altogether free from insult, and on one occasion, at least, an intemperate Irish woman shook her fist at him.

A dark, quiet crowd, that was greater each day, a crowd more than half women, headed, as a cloud will sometimes head permanently upon a mountain crest, in the market place outside the Clayton town-hall, where the conference was held.

I considered myself justified in regarding Lord Redcar's passing automobile with a special animosity because of the looks in our oval.

We held our little house on lease; the owner was a mean, saving, old man named Pettigrew, who lived in a villa adorned with plaster images of dogs and goats, at Overcastle, and in spite of our specific agreement, he would do no repairs for us at all. He seated scarce in my mother's tandem. Once, long ago, she had been befriended with her rent, with half of her quarter's rent, and he had extended the days of grace a month; because that same day she might need the same mercy again made her his subject then. She was afraid even to ask that he should cease the rent to be demanded for fear he might take offense. But one night the rats poured in on her bed and gave her a cold, and starved and soaked her poor, old, patchwork counterpane. Then she got me to compose an excessively polite letter to old Pettigrew, begging him as a favor to perform his legal obligations. It was part of the general indelicacy of those days that such one-cited law as existed was a profound mystery to the common people, its provisions impossible to ascertain, its machinery impossible to set in motion. Instead of the clearly written code, the hard statements of rules and principles that are now at the service of every one, the law was the maddled secret of the legal profession. Four people, overworked people, had constantly to rethink to petty wrongs because of the intolerable uncertainties not only of law but of cost, and of the demands upon time and money proceedings might make. There was indeed no justice for anyone too poor to command a good solicitor's deference and loyalty; there was

nothing but rough police protection and the magistrate's grudging or eccentric advice for the mass of the population. The civil law, in particular, was a mysterious, upper-class weapon, and I can imagine no injustice that would have been sufficient to induce my poor old mother to appeal to it.

All this begins to sound incredible. I can only assure you that it was so.

But I, when I learnt that old Pettigrew had been down to tell my mother all about his character, to inspect the roof, and to allege that nothing was needed, gave way to my most frequent emotion in those days, a burning indignation, and took the matter into my own hands. I wrote and asked him, with a withering air of technicality, to have the roof repaired "as per agreement," and added, "if not done in one week from now we shall be obliged to take proceedings." I had not mentioned that high line of conduct to my mother at first, and so when old Pettigrew came down in a state of great agitation with my letter in his hand, she was almost equally agitated.

"How could you write to old Mr. Pettigrew like that?" she asked me.

I said that old Pettigrew was a shameful old rascal, or worse to that effect, and I am afraid I behaved in a very unskillful way to her when she said that she had settled everything with him—she wouldn't say how, but I could guess well enough—and that I was to promise her, promise her faithfully, to do nothing more in the matter. I wouldn't promise her.

And—having nothing better to employ me than—I presently went raging to old Pettigrew in order to put the whole thing before him in what I considered a proper light. Old Pettigrew ended my illumination; he saw me coming up his front steps—I can still see his queer, old nose and the crinkled brow over his eye and the little wisp of grey hair that showed over the corner of his window-blind—and he instructed his servant to put up the chain when she answered the door, and to tell me he would not see me. So I had to fall back upon my pen.

Then it was, as I had no idea what was the proper "proceedings" to take, the brilliant idea occurred to me of appealing to Lord Redcar as the grand landlord, and, as it were, our feudal chief, and possi-

ing out to him that his security for his rent was depositing in old Pettigrew's hands. I added some general observations on leaseholds, the taxation of ground rents, and the private ownership of the soil. And Lord Redcar, whose spirit revolted at democracy, and who cultivated a port, haughty manner with his inferiors to show as much, earned my distinguished hatred forever by causing his secretary to present his compliments to me, and his request that I would mind my own business and leave him to manage his. At which I was so greatly enraged that I first tore this note into minute, innumerable pieces, and then dashed it dramatically all over the floor of my room—from which, to keep my master from the job, I afterward had to pick it up laboriously on all fours.

I was still instituting a tremendous report, an indictment of all Lord Redcar's class, their manners, morals, economic and political crimes, when my trouble with Nettie arose to swamp all minor troubles. Yet not so completely but that I started ahead when his lordship's master car wheeled by me, as I went about upon my long, considering quest for a weapon. And I discovered after a time that my mother had bruised her knee and was lame. Fearing to irritate me by bringing the thing before me again, she had set herself to move her bed out of the way of the drip without my help, and she had knocked her knee. All her poor belongings, I discovered, were covering now close to the peeling bedroom walls; there had come a vast dislocation of the ceiling and a washbasin was in occupation of the middle of her chamber.

It is necessary that I should set these things before you, should give the key of inconvenience and uneasiness in which all things were arranged, should suggest the breath of trouble that stirred along the hot, summer streets, the anxiety about the strike, the rumors and indignations, the gatherings and meetings, the increasing gravity of the policeman's face, the combative headlines of the local papers, the knots of picketers who scrutinized anyone who passed near the silent, windowless houses. But in my mind, you must understand, each impression came and went, irregularly, they made a moving background, changing undimensions to my preoccupation by that darkly shaping purpose to which a revolver was so impetuous an essential.

Along the darkling streets, amidst the sullen crowds, the thought of Nettie, my Nettie, and her gentleness never made over a world, influential spot of purpose in my brain.

### III

It was three days after—on Wednesday, that is to say—that the first of those minor outbreaks occurred that ended in the bloody affair of Peacock Green and the flooding out of the entire first of the Swarthgates collieries. It was the only one of those disturbances I was destined to see, and, at most, a mere trivial preliminary.

The accounts that have been written of this affair vary very widely. To read them is to realize the extraordinary carelessness of truth that dishonored the press of those latter days. In my bureau I have several files of the daily papers of the old time—I collect them, as a matter of fact—and three or four of about that date I have put this moment taken out and looked through to refresh my impression of what I saw. They lie before me, queer, shivered, incredible things, the cheap paper has already become brittle and brown and split along the creases, the ink faded or smeared, and I have to handle them with the utmost care when I glance among their ragged headlines. As I sit here in this serene place, their quality throughout, their arrangement, their tone, their arguments and colorations, read as though they came from drugged and drunken men. They give me the effect of faded howling, of screams and shouts heard faintly in a little photograph. It is only on Monday I find, and bated deep below the war news, that these publications contain any intimation that unusual happenings were forward in Clayton and Swarthgates.

What I saw was toward evening. I had been learning to shoot with my new possession. I had walked out with it four or five miles across a patch of moorland, and down to a secluded little copse full of bluebells, halfway along the highway between Lort and Stafford. Here I had spent the afternoon, superintending and practicing with careful deliberation and great persistence. I had brought an old life-line of mine with me, that folded and unfolded, and each shot-hole I made I marked and regis-

bered to compare with my other excursions. At last I was satisfied that I could hit a playing card at thirty paces, nine times out of ten; the light was getting too bad for me to see my perished half-eyes, and in that state of quiet moodiness that sometimes comes with hunger to passionate men, I returned by the way of Swathinglea toward my home.

The road I followed came down between banks of wretched-looking workmen's houses, in close-packed rows on either side, and took upon itself the rôle of Swathinglea High Street, where, at a lamp and a pillar-box, the steam trains began. So far that dirty, hot way had been unusually quiet and empty, but beyond the corner, where the first group of beer shops clustered, it became populous. It was very quiet still, even the children were a little inactive, but there were a lot of people standing about idly in little groups, and with a general direction toward the gates of the Rantock Burden colliery.

The place was being picketed, although at that time the miners were still nominally at work, and the conferences between masters and men were still in session at Clayton town hall. But one of the men employed at the Rantock Burden pit, Jack Briscoe, was a socialist, and he had distinguished himself by a violent letter upon the crisis in the leading socialist paper in England, "The Clarion," in which he had ascribed among the motives of Lord Redcar the publication of this had been followed by instant dismissal. As Lord Redcar writes a day or so later to the "Times"—I have that "Times," I have all the London papers of the last month before the Change!—"The man was paid off and kicked out. Any self-respecting employer would do the same."

The thing had happened overnight, and the men did not at once take a clear line upon what was, after all, a very intricate and debatable question. But they came out in a sort of semi-official strike from all Lord Redcar's collieries beyond the canal that bleeds Swathinglea. They did so without formal notice, committing a breach of contract by this sudden evasion. But in the long labor struggles of the old days, the workers were constantly putting themselves in the wrong, and committing illegalities through that overpowering craving for dramatic promptness natural to uneducated minds.

All the men had not come out of the Rantock Burden pit. Something was wrong there, an interdiction if nothing else; the mine was still working, and there was a rumor that men from Darton had been held in readiness by Lord Redcar, and were already in the mine. Now, it is absolutely impossible to ascertain certainly how things stood at that time. The newspapers say this and that, but nothing trustworthy remains.

I believe I should have gone striding through the dark stage of that stagnant industrial drama without asking a question, if Lord Redcar had not chanced to come upon the scene about the same time as myself and inconspicuously end its magnificence.

He had promised that if the men wanted a struggle he would put up the best fight they had ever had. He had been active all that afternoon in meeting the quarrel halfway, and preparing as comprehensively as possible for the scrum force of "black-legs," as we called them, who were, he said and we believed, to replace the strikers in his pits.

I was an eyewitness of the whole of the affair outside the Rantock Burden pit, and—I do not know what happened.

Picture to yourself how the thing came to me.

I was descending a steep, cobble, crenelated road between banked-up footways, perhaps six feet high, upon which, in a continuous series, opened the long-room doors of rows of dark, low cottages. The perspective of square, blue slate roofs and chattering chimneys drifted downward toward the regular open space before the colliery, a space covered with reeds, which-scarred mud, with a patch of weedy clump to the left and the colliery gates to the right. Beyond, High Street with its shops remained again in good earnest and went on, and the lines of the main tramway that started out from before my feet, and were bent shining and scintillating with reflected sunlight and then lost in a dust-veil, took up, for one acute moment, the grey yellow irradiation of a newly lit gas lamp as they vanished round the bend. Beyond spread a darkling march of houses, an infatigable of little smoking breasts, and emergent, meager churches, public houses, board schools, and other buildings amidst the prevailing chimneys of Swathinglea. To the right, very clear and relatively high,

the Beacock Building jet mouth was marked by a giant lattice bearing a great black wheel, very sharp and distinct in the twilight. In an irregular perspective beyond, were others following the line of the scene. The general effect, as one came down the hill, was of a dark, compressed life beneath a very high and wide and luminous evening sky against which these jet wheels rose. And, ruling the calm spacelessness of that heaven, was the great comet, now green-white, and wonderful for all who had eyes to see.

The fading afterglow of the sunset threw up all the confusion and skyline to the west, and the comet rose eastward, out of the pouring torrents of smoke from Hadden's lungs. The moon had still to rise.

By this time the comet had begun to assume the claylike form still familiar through the medium of a thousand photographs and sketches. At first it had been an almost telescopic speck; it had brightened to the dimensions of the greatest star in the heavens, it had still grown, hour by hour, to its incredibly red, its scintillant and inevitable rush upon our earth, and it had squallied and surpassed the moon. Now it was the most splendid thing this sky of earth has ever held. I have never seen a photograph that gave a proper idea of it. Never, at any time, did it assume the conventional tailed outflow comets are supposed to have. Astronomers talked of its double tail, one preceding it, and one trailing behind it, but these were inebriated to nothing, so that it had rather the form of a halting puff of luminous smoke with an intense, brighter heart. It rose, a hot, yellow color, and only began to show its distinctive greenness when it was close of the morn of evening.

It compelled attention for a space. For all my earthly concentration of mind, I could not stare at it for a moment with a vague anticipation that, after all, in some way, so strange and glorious an object must have significance, could not possibly be a matter of absolute indifference to the scheme and value of my life.

But how?

I thought of Parolou. I thought of the panic and confusion that was spreading in this very matter, and of the assurance of scientific men that the thing weighed no tons, at the utmost, a few hundred tons of thinly diffused gas and dust, that even

were it to smite the earth fully, nothing could possibly ensue. And, after all, and I, what earthly significance has anyone found in the stars?

Then, as one still descended, the houses and buildings rose up, the presence of these watching groups of people, the tension of the situation, and one forgot the sky.

Preoccupied with myself and with my dark desire about Nitte and my honor, I descended my course through the staggering threat of this gathering, and was caught unaware, when suddenly the whole scene flashed into drama.

The attention of everyone swung round with an irresistible magnetism toward High Street, and caught me as a rush of waters might catch a wisp of hay. Abruptly the whole crowd was sounding one note. It was not a word, it was a sound that mingled throat and protest, something between a prolonged "Ah!" and "Ugh!" Then, with a hoarse intensity of anger, came a low, heavy howl, "Boo! boo—oo!" a note stupidly expressive of universal sympathy. "Too, too!" and Lord Redour's automobile in rebellion separates. "Too, too!" One heard it whining and threatening as the crowd obliged it to slow down.

Everybody seemed in motion toward the colliery gate, I, too, with the others.

I heard a shout. Through the dark figure about me I saw the motor car stop and move forward again, and had a glimpse of something writhing on the ground.

It was alleged afterward that Lord Redour was driving, and that he quite deliberately knocked down a little boy who would not get out of his way. It is asserted with equal confidence that the boy was a man who tried to pass across the front of the motor car as it came slowly through the crowd, and who escaped by a hair's breadth, and then slipped on the tram rail and fell down. I have both accounts set forth, under screaming headlines, in two of these sore newspapers upon my desk. No one could ever ascertain the truth, indeed, in such a blind tumult of passion, could there be any truth?

There was a rush forward, the horn of the car sounded, everything swayed violently to the right for perhaps ten yards or so, and there was a report like a pistol shot.

For a moment everyone seemed running away. A woman, carrying a shovel

wrapped child, blundered into me, and sent me reeling back. Everyone thought of firemen, but, as a matter of fact, something had gone wrong with the motor, what in those old-fashioned countenances was called a back fire. A thin puff of bluish smoke hung in the air behind the thing. The majority of the people retreated back in a disorderly fashion and left a clear space about the struggle that centered upon the motor car.

The man or boy who had fallen was lying on the ground with no one near him, a black lump, an extended arm and two sprawling feet. The motor car had stopped, and its three occupants were standing up. Six or seven black figures surrounded the car, and appeared to be holding on to it as if to prevent it from starting again. One—it was Mitchell, a well-known labor leader—argued in fierce, low tones with Lord Redcar. I could not hear anything they said; I was not near enough. Behind me the colliery gates were open, and there was a sense of help coming to the motor car from that direction. There was an unoccupied, muddy space for fifty yards, perhaps, between car and gate, and then the wheels and head of the jet rose black against the sky. I was one of a rude semicircle of people that hung as yet indeterminate in action about this dispute.

It was natural, I suppose, that my fingers should close upon the revolver in my pocket.

I advanced with the vagrant intentions in the world, and not so quickly but that several men hurried past me to join the little knot holding up the car.

Lord Redcar, in his big, hairy overcoat, tumbled up over the group about him; his gestures were free and threatening, and his voice loud. He made a fine figure there, I may admit; he was a big, fair, handsome young man with a fine tenor voice and an instinct for gallant effect. My eyes were drawn to him at first wholly. He seemed a symbol, a triumphant symbol, of all that the theory of aristocracy claims, of all that filled my soul with resentment. His chauffeur sat crouched together, peering at the crowd under his lordship's arm. But Mitchell showed as a sturdy figure also, and his voice was firm and loud.

"You've hurt that lad," said Mitchell, over and over again. "You'll wait here till you see if he's hurt."

"I'll wait here or not as I please," said

Redcar; and to the chauffeur, "Herd! get down and look at it!"

"You'd better not get down," said Mitchell, and the chauffeur stood bent and hesitating on the step.

The man on the back seat stood up, leaned forward, and spoke to Lord Redcar, and for the first time my attention was drawn to him. It was young Vennell! His handsome face shone clear and free in the green pulch of the comet.

I ceased to hear the quarrel that was raising the voices of Mitchell and Lord Redcar. This new fact sent them spinning into the background. Young Vennell!

It was my own purpose coming to meet me halfway.

There was to be a fight here; it seemed certain to come to a scuffle, and here we were—

What was I to do? I thought very rapidly. Unless my memory cheats me, I acted with swift decision. My hand tightened on my revolver, and then I remembered it was unloaded. I had thought my course out in an instant. I turned round and pushed my way out of the angry crowd that was now surging back toward the motor car.

It would be quiet and out of sight, I thought, among the dump heaps across the road, and there I might load unobserved.

A big young man, standing forward with his teeth clenched, halted for one second at the sight of me.

"What?" said he. "Ain't afraid of them, are you?"

I glanced over my shoulder and back at him, was near shoving him my pistol, and the expression changed in his eyes. He hung perplexed at me. Then with a grunt he went on.

I heard the voices growing loud and sharp behind me.

I hesitated, half turned toward the dispute, then set off running toward the heaps. Some instinct told me not to be detected loading. I was cool enough, therefore, to think of the aftermath of the thing I meant to do.

I looked back once again toward the swaying discussion—or was it a fight now?—and then I dropped into a hollow, knelt among the weeds, and loaded with eager, trembling fingers. I loaded one chamber, got up and went back a dozen paces, thought of possibilities, ventilated, re-



named, and loaded all the other chambers. I did it slowly because I felt a little clumsy, and at the end came a moment of inspection. Had I forgotten anything? And then, for a few seconds, I crouched before I rose, awaiting the first gust of reaction against my impulse. I took thought, and for a moment that great paper-white motor overhead came back into my consciousness. For the first time then, I looked it closely with all the fierce violence that had crept into human life. I poured up that with what I meant to do. I was going to shoot young Verrall under the beneficence of that green glare, as it were.

But about Nellie?

I found it impossible to think out that obvious complication.

I came up over the heap again, and walked slowly back toward the struggle.

Of course I had to kill him!

Now, I would have you believe I did not want to murder young Verrall at all at that particular time. I had not pictured such circumstances as these; I had never thought of him in connection with Lord Redcar and our black industrial world. He was in that distant other world of Checkhall, the world of parks and gardens, of warm sunset emotions and Nellie. His appearance here was disconcerting. I was taken by surprise. I was too tired and hungry to think clearly, and the hard application of our antagonism prevailed with me. In the turmoil of my past emotions I had thought constantly of conflicts, confrontations, deeds of violence, and now the memory of these things took possession of me as though they were irreversible resolutions.

There was a sharp exclamation, the clank of a woman, and the crowd came ranging back. The fight had begun.

Lord Redcar, I believe, had jumped down from his car and killed Mitchell, and men were already running out to his assistance from the colliery gates.

I had some difficulty in shooting through the crowd; I can still remember very vividly being jammed at one time between two big men so that my arms were pinned to my sides, but all the other details are gone out of my mind until I found myself almost violently projected forward into the "scrap."

I blundered against the corner of the motor car, and came round it face to face with young Verrall, who was descending from the back compartment. His face

was touched with orange from the automobile's big lamps, which conflicted with the shadows of the sunset light, and distorted him oddly. That effect lasted but an instant, but it put me out. Then he came a step forward, and the rusty lights and the darkness vanished.

I don't think he recognized me, but he perceived immediately that I meant attacking. He struck out at once at me a haphazard blow, and touched me on the cheek.

Instinctively I let go of the pistol, snatched my right hand out of my pocket and brought it up in a halting parry, and then let out with my left leg on his chest.

It sent him staggering, and as he went back I saw recognition mingle with the astonishment in his face.

"You know me, you villain," I cried, and hit again.

Then I was spinning sideways, half stunned, with a huge lump of a fist under my jaw. I had an impression of Lord Redcar as a great, furry bulk, towering like some Homeric hero above the fray. I went down before him; it made him seem to rush up; and he ignored me further. His big, fat voice consoled young Verrall.

"Cut, Teddy! It won't do. The pickets' got 'em back."

Foot scraped about me, and some hob-nailed shoe kicked my ankle and went scuffling. There were shouts and curses, and then everything had swept past me. I rolled over on my face, and beheld the chauffeur, young Verrall, and Lord Redcar—the latter holding up his long skirts of fur, and making a grotesque figure—one behind the other, in full bolt across a coldly sunset-lit interval, toward the open gates of the colliery.

I raised myself up on my hands.

Young Verrall!

My revolver! I had forgotten it. I was covered with sooty mud, knees, elbows, shoulders, back. And I had not even drawn my revolver!

A feeling of ridiculous impotence overwhelmed me. I struggled painfully to my feet.

I hesitated for a moment toward the gates of the colliery, and then went limping homeward, dazed, pained, confused, and ashamed. I had not the heart or desire to help in the wrecking and burning of Lord Redcar's motor.

(To be continued)



## In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

### BOOK THE FIRST—THE COMET

#### CHAPTER THE THIRD—THE AFTERMATH—(CONTINUED)

**NARRATOR:** The narrator tells the story of the Comet Change. When a young man he was a clerk in a postoffice in Clinton. He is refused an increase in wages and gives up his position. His intimate friend, Purford, a man of his own age, is a socialist, who has, besides, a taste for science and is deeply concerned about a comet whose path is approaching the earth's orbit. They continue to think about socialism, he argues, when there is a possibility that the comet will hit the earth! They are both in England, on account of overproduction and the invasion of American products in the English market. Strikes and lockouts run throughout the country. The narrator has been engaged to marry Nettie Street, but the engagement has been broken on account of his socialism and religious doubts. He is distressed because of a suspicion that Edward Verrell, the son of Sam's employer, is paying the girl attention. Obeying some vague impulses, he leaves a revolver. Trouble breaks out in the colonies owned by Lord Reding, whose name our is destroyed by the mob. The narrator witnesses the affair and goes home in a greatly disturbed condition.

#### IV

**I**N the night, fever, pain, fatigue—it may have been the indignation of my supper of bread and cheese—roused me at last out of a long slumber to face disaster. I was a soul lost amidst desolation and shame, dishonored, evilly treated, hopeless. I cried against the God I denied, and cursed him as I lay.

And it was in the nature of my fever, which was indeed only half fatigue and ill-

ness, and the rest the fever of passionate youth, that Nettie, a strangely distorted Netie, should come through the brief dreams that marked the exhaustion of that night, to dominate my waking. I was unwise, with an exaggerated diffidence, of the currency of her physical charm for me, of her every grace and beauty; she took to herself the whole gamut of desire in me and the whole gamut of pride. She, herself, was my last honor. It was not only loss but disgrace to lose her. She stood for life and all that was devoted, she mocked me as a creature of failure and defeat.



Drawn by Stuart Legg

I NEVER SAW HIM WEEPING

There were times when something near madness took me, and I gnashed my teeth and dug my nails into my hands and cursed to curse and cry out only by reason of the inefficiency of words. And once, toward dawn, I got out of bed, and sat by my looking-glass with my loaded revolver in my hand. I stood up at last and put it carefully in my drawer and looked at—out of reach of any gusty impulse. After that I slept for a little while.

Such nights were nothing rare and strange in that old order of the world. Never a city, never a night the whole year round, but amidst those who slept were those who waked, plumbing the depths of wrath and misery. Countless thousands there were as ill, as troubled, they agonized near to the very border line of madness, each one the center of a universe darkened and lost.

The next day I went to gloom's laboratory. I had intended to go to Churchhill that day, but my handied uncle was too careless for that to be possible. I sat indoors in the ill-lit domestic kitchen, with my feet handaged, and mused darkly and read. My dear old mother waited on me, and her brown eyes watched me and wondered at my black silences, my flowing preoccupations. I had not told her how it was my uncle came to be handied and my clothes muddy. She had brushed my clothes in the morning before I got up.

Ah well! Mothers are not treated in that way now. That, I suppose, must console me. I wonder how far you will be able to picture that dark, grimy, untidy room, with its bare deal table, its tattered wall paper, the samopans and kettle on the narrow, cheap, but by no means, economical range, the tubes under the fireplace, the rust-spotted steel fender on which my handaged feet rested, I wonder how near you can come to seeing the sweating, pale-faced hobnobbing I was, unshaven and collarless, in the Windsor chair, and the little dimed, dirty, devoted old woman who hovered about me with love pouring out from her puckered eyelids.

When she went out to buy some vegetables on the middle of the morning she got me a half-penny journal. It was just such a one as these upon my desk, only that the copy I read was damp from the press, and these are as dry and brittle as they crack if I touch them. I have a copy of the actual issue I read that morning, it was a paper

called emphatically the "New Paper," but everybody bought it and everybody called it the "yell." It was full that morning of vaporous news, and still more vaporous headlines, so vaporous that for a little while I was rescued from my spiritual brooding to wider interests. For it seemed that Germany and England were on the brink of war.

Of all the monstrous, irrational phenomena of the former time, war was certainly the most strikingly insane. In reality, it was probably far less mischievous than such quarter evils as, for example, the general acquiescence in the private ownership of land, but its evil consequences showed as plainly that even in those days of stifling confusion one marvelled at it. On no considerable ground was there any sense in modern war. Save for the slaughter and mauling of a multitude of people, the destruction of vast quantities of material, and the waste of innumerable units of energy, it effected nothing. The old war of savage and barbaric nations did, at least, change humanity. You assumed yourselves to be a superior tribe in physique and discipline, you demonstrated this upon your neighbors, and, if successful, you took their land and their women and perpetuated and enlarged your superiority.

The new war changed nothing but the color of maps, the design of postage stamps, and the relationship of a few accidentally conspicuous individuals. In one of the last of these international epileptic fits, for example, the English, with much dynamite and bad poetry, and a few hundred deaths in battle, conquered the South African Boers at a gross cost of about three thousand pounds per head. They could have bought the whole of that preposterous imitation of a nation for a tenth of that sum, and except for a few substitutions of personalities, this group of partially corrupt officials in the place of that, and so forth, the permanent change was altogether insignificant. (But an excellent young man in Austria committed suicide when at length the Triennial moved to be a "nation.") Men were through the end of that war after it was all over, and found humanity unchanged, except for a general impoverishment, and the convenience of an unlimited supply of empty rifles and bullets and wire and cartridge cases—unchanged and



*Illustration by Peter Jones*

THE WORD UPON IT—THERE WAS BUT ONE WORD UPON IT IN STARKING LETTERS—WAR,  
"WAR."

reasoning, with a slight perplexity, all its old habits and misunderstandings, the nigger still in his sham-like head, the white in his ugly, ill-managed slowness.

But we in England saw all these things, or did not see them, through the mists of the "New Paper" in a light of magic. All my adolescence, from fourteen to seventeen, went to the music of that monstrous reasoning faculty, the cheering, the music-fest, the songs and the warbling of flags, the swarms of the grotesque Butler and the glorious heroism of De Wet—who always got away; that was the great point about the hero De Wet—and a never occurred to us that the total population we fought against was less than half the number of those who lived cramped, ignoble lives within the compass of the Four Towns.

But before and after that stupid conflict of stupidities, a greater antagonism was coming into being, was slowly and quietly defining itself as a thing inevitable, sinking now a little out of attention only to resume more emphatically, now flushing into some acute, definitive expression, and now percolating and pervading some new region of thought, and that was the antagonism of Germany and Great Britain.

Here were we British, forty-one millions of people, in a state of almost indescribably gross, obscene, and moral rotunda that we had neither the courage, the energy, nor the intelligence to improve. Most of us had hardly the courage to think about it and our affairs were hopelessly entangled with the entirely different confusions of three hundred and fifty million other persons scattered about the globe. And here were the Germans over against us, fifty-six millions, in a state of confusion no whit better than our own. The noisy little creatures who directed papers and wrote books and gave lectures, generally in that time of world-dementia, pretended to be the national mind. They were busy in both countries, with a sort of infernal unanimity, exhorting—and not only exhorting, but successfully persuading,—the two peoples to divert such small, common store of material, moral and intellectual energy as either possessed, into the purely destructive and wasteful business of war. And—I have to tell you these things even if you do not believe them, because they are vital to my story—there was not a man alive who could have told you of any real,

permanent benefit, of anything whatever to counterbalance the obvious waste and evil, that would result from a war between England and Germany, whether England shattered Germany or was smashed and overwhelmed, or whatever the end might be.

The thing was, in fact, an enormous irrational obsession; it was in the consciousness of our nation, rationally parallel to the spiritual wrath and jealousy that swayed my individual neuroses. It measured the acres of common emotion over the common intelligence, the legacy of inordinate passions we have received from the brute from which we came. Just as I had become the slave of my own suspicion and anger, and went higher and thicker with a loaded revolver, seeking and intending vague, fluctuating crimes, so these two nations went about the earth, hot-eyed and maddled-headed, with loaded rifles and armies terribly ready at hand. Only, there was not even a Noëlle to justify their stupidity. There was nothing but quite imaginary threatening on either side.

And the press was the chief instrument that kept these two huge multitudes of people directed against each other.

The press—those newspapers that are now so strange to us—like the "Empire," the "Nation," the "Times," and all the other great monstrous shapes of that extraordinary time—was in the nature of an unanticipated accident. It had happened, as words happen in abandoned gardens, just as all our world had happened, because there was no clear Will in the world to bring about anything better. Toward the end the "press" was almost entirely under the direction of youngish men of that eager, rather unintelligent type, that is never able to detect their sinners, that pursues nothing with incredible pride and zeal. If you would really understand this mad era, the combat brought to us and, you must keep in mind that every phase in the production of these queer old things was pervaded by a strong, blind energy and happened in a concentrated rush.

Let me describe to you, very briefly, a newspaper day.

Figure first, then, a hastily erected, and still more hastily designed, building in a dirty, paper-littered back street of old London, and a number of shabbily dressed men coming and going in this with projectile swiftness. Within this factory, com-

pieces of printers, tensely active with nimble fingers—they were always speeding up the printers—ply their typesetting machines, and cast and arrange masses of metal in a sort of kitchen inferno, above which, in a beehive of little, brightly lit rooms, disheveled men sit and scribble. There is a thronging of telephones and a clinking of telegraph instruments, a rushing of messengers, a running to and fro of heated men, clutching proofs and copy. Then begins a roar of machinery catching the infection, going faster and faster, and whirling and banging. Engineers, who have never had time to wash since their birth, fly about with oil runs, while paper rain off its rolls with a shoulder of haste. The proprietors you must suppose arriving explosively on a swift motor car, leaping out before the thing is at a standstill, with letters and documents clutched in his hand, rushing in, resolve to "bustle," getting wonderfully in everybody's way. At the sight of him even the messenger boys who are waking, get up and newspaper to and fro. Sprinkle your vision with collisions, curses, imprecations. You imagine all the parts of this complex, fantastic machine working hysterically toward a crescendo of haste and excitement as the night wears on. At last, the only things that seem to travel slowly in all these tearing, vibrating premises, are the hands of the clock.

Slowly things draw on toward publication, the consummation of all these stresses. Then, in the small hours, into the new dark and deserted streets comes a wild whirl of carts and men, the place sports paper at every door, piles, heaps, torrents of papers, that are snatched and flung about in what looks like a free fight, and off with a rush and clatter east, west, north and south. The internet passes outwardly, the men from the little rooms are going homeward, the printers disperse, pressing, the morning presser shudder. The paper exists. Distribution follows manufacture, and we follow the bundles.

Our vision becomes a vision of disposal. You see these bundles hurling into stations, catching trains by a hair's breadth, speeding on their way, breaking up, smaller bundles of them hurled with a better accuracy out upon the platforms than railway, and then everywhere a division of these smaller bundles into still smaller bundles,

into dispersing parcels, into separate papers. The dawn happens unthought amidst a great running and shoveling of bags, a shoving through letter-slots, openings of windows, spreading out upon back-stalls. For the space of a few hours, you must figure the whole country dotted white with reading papers. Placards everywhere welcome the hurried life for the day. Men and women in trains, men and women sitting and reading, men by study lenders, people sitting up in bed, mothers and sons and daughters waiting for father to finish—a million scattered people are reading—reading headlines—or feverishly ready to read. It is just as if some vehement jet had sprayed that white foam of papers over the surface of the land.

Nonsense! The whole affair a noisy paroxysm of nonsense, unreasonable excitement, wilful mischief, and waste of strength—signifying nothing.

And out of these white particles was the paper I held in my hands, as I sat with a handaged foot on the steel ladder in that dark, underground latches of my mother's, clean raised from my personal troubles by the yelp of the headlines. She sat, nerves tucked up from her rosy arms, jerking potatoes as I read.

The comet had been driven into obscurity overhead. The columns headed, "Distinguished Scientist says Comet will strike our Earth. Does it Matter?" went unread. "Germany"—I usually figured this mythical, malignant creature as a cornered self-mutilated emperor enhanced by berserk black wings and a large sword—had insulted our flag. That was the message of the "New Paper" and the monster towered over me, threatening death outrages, vividly spring upon my hostless country's colors. Somebody had hoisted a British flag on the right bank of some tropical river I had never heard of before, and a drunken German officer, under ambiguous instructions, had torn it down. Then one of the converted, abundant natives of the country, a British subject indisputably, had been shot in the leg. But the facts were by no means clear. Nothing was clear, except that we were not going to steal any resources from Germany. Whatever had, or had not, happened we meant to have an apology for, and apparently they did not mean apologizing.

# "HAS WAR COME AT LAST?"

That was the headline. One's heart leaped to assist.

There were hours that day, when I clean forgot Nettie, in dreaming of battles and victories by land and sea, of shell fire, and entrenchments, and the heaped slaughter of many thousands of men.

But the next morning I started for Checkshill, startled, I remember, in a curiously hopeful state of mind, oblivious of comets, strikes and wars.

## V

You must understand that I had no set plan of murder when I walked over to Checkshill. I had no set plan of any sort. There was a great confusion of dramatically conceived intentions in my head, scenes of threatening and denunciation and terror, but I did not mean to kill. The revolver was to turn upon my rival my disadvantages in age and physique. But that wasn't a really! The revolver!—I took the revolver because I had the revolver and was a foolish young man. It was a dramatic sort of thing to take. I had, I say, no plan at all.

Ever and again during that second trudge to Checkshill, I was assailed with a novel, unreasonable hope. I had awakened in the morning with the hope—it may have been the last, untold trail of some obliterated dream—that, after all, Nettie might still relent toward me, that her heart was kind toward me in spite of all that I imagined had happened. I even thought it possible that I might have misinterpreted what I had seen. Perhaps she would explain everything. My revolver was in my pocket for all that.

I slipped at the outset, but after the second mile, my ankle seemed to forgetfulness, and the rest of the way I walked well. Suppose, after all, I was wrong?

I was still debating that as I came through the park. By the corner of the paddock near the keeper's cottage, I was reminded, by some belated blue hyacinths, of a time when Nettie and I had gathered there together. It seemed impossible we could really have parted ourselves for good and all. A wave of tenderness flowed over me, and still flooded me as I

came through the little dell and drew toward the hollow. But there the sweet Nettie of my boy's love faded, and I thought of the new Nettie of desire and the man I had come upon in the moonlight. I thought of the narrow, hot passion that had grown so strongly out of my spring-time freshness, and my mood darkened to night.

I crossed the beech wood and came toward the gardens with a restless and sorrowful heart. When I reached the green door in the garden wall, I was amazed, for a space, with so violent a trembling, that I could not grip the latch to lift it, for I no longer had any doubt how this would end.

Through the open door of one of the glasshouses, I saw old Stuart. He was leaning against the staging, his hands in his pockets, and so deep in thought he gave no heed to me.

I hesitated, and went on toward the cottage, slowly.

Something struck me as unusual about the place, but I could not tell at first what it was. One of the bedroom windows was open, and the customary short blind, with its brass upper rail partly unfastened, dropped obliquely across the window space. It looked negligent and odd, for usually everything about the cottage was conspicuously trim.

The door was standing wide open, and everything was well, but giving that usually orderly hall an odd look—it was about half-past two in the afternoon—was a pile of three dirty plates, with used knives and forks upon them, on one of the hall chairs.

I went into the hall, looked into either room, and hesitated.

Then I fell to upon the door-knocker and gave a loud *na-na-na*, and followed this up with an audible, "Hi-hi-hi!"

For a time no one answered me, and I stood listening and expectant, with my fingers about my weapon. Some one moved about upstairs presently, and was still again. The tension of waiting seemed to loosen my nerves.

I had my hand on the knocker for the second time, when Pam, Nettie's sister, appeared in the doorway.

For a moment we remained staring at each other without speaking. Her hair was disheveled, her face dirty, tear-stained, and irregularly red. Her expression as



the sight of me was pure astonishment. I thought she was about to say something, and then she had darted away out of the house again.

"I say, Puss!" I said. "Puss!"

I followed her out of the door. "Puss! What's the matter? Where's Nettie?"

She vanished round the corner of the house.

I hesitated, perplexed whether I should pursue her. What did it all mean? Then I heard some one upstairs.

"Willie!" cried the voice of Mrs. Stuart. "Is that you?"

"Yes," I answered. "Where's everyone? Where's Nettie? I want to have a talk with her."

She did not answer, but I heard her dress rustle as she moved. I judged she was upon the landing overhead.

I passed at the foot of the stairs, expecting her to appear and come down.

Suddenly came a strange sound, a rush of sounds, wash jumbled and hurrying, confused and shapeless, borne along upon a note of throbbing distress that at last incorporated the words altogether and ended in a wail. Except that it came from a woman's throat it was exactly the babbling sound of a weeping child with a grievance. "I can't," she said, "I can't," and that was all I could distinguish. It was to my young ears the strangest sound conceivable from a kindly, motherly little woman, whom I had always thought of chiefly as an unparalleled maker of cakes. It frightened me. I went upstairs at once in a state of infinite alarm, and there she was in her room, leaning on the top of a bureau. I never saw such weeping.

As I came into the bedroom her voice rose again. "Oh that I should have to tell you, Willie! Oh that I should have to tell you!" She dropped her head again, and a fresh gust of tears swept all further words away.

I said nothing. I was too astonished, but I drew nearer to her, and waited.

"That I should have lived to see this day!" she wailed. "I had rather a thousand times she was struck dead at my feet."

I began to understand.

"Mrs. Stuart," I said, clearing my throat; "what has become of Nettie?"

"That I should have lived to see this day!" she said by way of reply.

I waited till her passion abated.

There came a lull. I forgot the weapon in my pocket. I said nothing, and suddenly she stood erect before me, wiping her swollen eyes. "Willie," she gasped, "she's gone!"

"Nettie?"

"Gone! Run away! Run away from her home. Oh, Willie, Willie! The shame of it! The sin and shame of it!"

She flung herself upon my shoulder, and clung to me, and began again to wish her daughter lying dead at our feet.

"There, there," said I, and all my being was a tremble. "Where has she gone?" I said as softly as I could.

But for the time she was preoccupied with her own sorrow, and I had to hold her there, and comfort her with the blackness of finality spreading over my soul.

"Where has she gone?" I asked for the fourth time.

"I don't know—we don't know. And oh, Willie, she went out yesterday morning! I said to her, 'Nettie,' I said to her, 'you're mighty fine for a morning call.' 'Fine clo's for a fine day,' she said, and that was her last words to me!—Willie!—the child I suckled at my breast!"

She went on with sobe, and now telling her story with a sort of fragmentary hurry. "She went out bright and shining, out of this house forever. She was smiling, Willie—as if she was glad to be going! ('Glad to be going,' I echoed with soundless lips.) 'You're mighty fine for the morning,' I say, 'mighty fine.' 'Let the girl be pretty,' says her father, 'while she's young!' And somewhere she'd got a parcel of her things hidden to pick up, and she was going off—out of this house forever!"

She became quiet.

"Let the girl be pretty," she repeated. "In the girl be pretty while she's young. Oh! how can we go on living, Willie? He doesn't show it, but he's like a sickened beast. He's wounded to the heart. She was always his favorite. He never seemed to care for Puss like he did for her. And she's wounded him——"

"Where has she gone?" I repeated at last to that.

"We don't know. She leaves her own blood, she stains herself—oh, Willie, it'll kill me! I wish she and me together were lying in our graves."

"But"—I restrained my lips and spoke slowly, "she may have gone to marry."

"If that was so! I've prayed to God it might be so, Willie. I've prayed that he'd take pity on her—him, I mean, she's with." I jerked out, "Who's that?"

"In her letter, she said he was a gentleman. She did say he was a gentleman."

"In her letter. Has she written? Can I see her letter?"

"Her father took it."

"But if she writes— When did she write?"

"It came this morning."

"But where did it come from? You can tell—"

"She didn't say. She said she was happy. She said love took one like a storm—"

"Come that! Where is her letter? Let me see it. And as for this gentleman—"

She stared at me.

"You know who it is."

"Willie!" she protested.

"You know who it is, whether she said or not."

Her eyes made a mute, unconfident denial.

"Young Verrill?"

She made no answer. "All I could do for you, Willie," she began presently.

"Was it young Verrill?" I insisted.

For a second, perhaps, we faced each other in stark understanding. Then she plumped back to the bureau, and her wet handkerchief, and I knew she sought refuge from my relentless eyes.

My pity for her vanished. She knew it was her mistress' son as well as I. And for some time she had known, she had felt.

I hovered over her for a moment, sick with assumed disgust. Then I suddenly thought me of old Stuart, out in the greenhouse, and turned and went downstairs.

## VI

Old Stuart was pitiful.

I found him still inert in the greenhouse where I had first seen him. He did not move as I drew near him; he glanced at me, and then stared hard again at the doorway before him.

"Oh, Willie," he said, "this is a black day for all of us."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"The missus takes on so," he said. "I came out here."

"What do you mean to do?"

"What is a man to do in such a case?"

"Do!" I cried, "why— Do!"

"He ought to marry her," he said.

"By God, yes!" I cried. "He must do that anyhow."

"He ought to. It's—it's cruel. But what am I to do? Suppose he won't? Likely he won't. What then?"

He drooped with an intensified despair.

"Here's this cottage," he said, pursuing some contrived argument. "We've lived here all our lives, you might say. Clear out? At my age? One can't die in a sham."

I stood before him for a space, speculating what thoughts might fill the gaps between those broken words. I found his derange, and the dimly shaped mental attitudes his words indicated, abominable. I said abruptly, "You have her letter?"

He dived into his breast pocket, became motionless for ten seconds, then woke up again and produced her letter. He drew it clumsily from its envelope, and handed it to me silently.

It was written on greenish-tinted, flimsy notepaper, and with all and more than Nettie's usual nervous and inadequacy of expression. Her handwriting bore no traces of emotion, it was round and upright and clear as though it had been done in a willing leisure. Always her letters were like masks upon her face; they hid like carians before the changing charms of her face. One altogether forgot the sound of her light clear voice, conditioned by a perplexing, overstayed thing that had mysteriously got a hold upon one's heart and pride. How did that letter run?

"My Dear Morgan:

"Do not be distressed at my going away. I have gone somewhere safe, and with some one who cares for me very much. I am sorry for your sakes, but it seems that it had to be. Love is a very difficult thing, and takes hold of one in ways one does not expect. Do not think I am ashamed about this. I glory in my love, and you must not trouble too much about me. I am very, very happy."

"Fondest love to Father and Pam."

"Your loving"

"Nannie."

That queer little document! I can see it now for the childish, simple thing it was, but at the time, I read it in a suppressed

english of rage. It plunged me into a pit of hopeless shame; there seemed to remain no pride for me in life until I had revenge. I stood staring at those rounded, upstanding loins, not trusting myself to speak or move. At last I stole a glance at Stuart.

"You can't even tell where she is," he said, turning the envelope in a hopeless manner, and then deciding. "It's hard on us, Willie. Here she is; she hasn't anything to complain of; a sort of pet for all of us. Not even made to do her share of the housework. And she goes off and leaves us like a bird that's learnt to fly. Can't trust us, that's what takes her. Put 'emself—— But there! What's to happen to her?"

"What's to happen to him?"

He shook his head to show that problem was beyond him.

"You'll go after her," I said in an even voice, "you'll make him marry her!"

"Where am I to go?" he asked helplessly, and held out the envelope with a gesture, "and what could I do? Even if I knew—How could I know the garden?"

"Great God!" I cried, "not leave these gardens! It's your home, man! If she was my daughter—if she was my daughter—I'd put the world to pieces!" I choked. "You mean to stand it?"

"What can I do?"

"Make him marry her! Home-ship her! Home-ship her, I say! I'd struggle him!"

He scratched slowly at his hairy cheek, opened his mouth, and shook his head. Then, with an intolerable note of shaggy, gentle wisdom, he said, "People of our sort, Willie, can't do things like that."

I came near to crying. I had a wild impulse to strike him in the face. Once in my boyhood, I happened upon a bird terribly mangled by some cat, and killed it in a frenzy of horror and pity. I had a gust of that same emotion now, as this abject, mutilated soul flattered in the dust, before me. Then, you know, I dismissed him from the case.

"May I look?" I asked.

He held out the envelope reluctantly.

"There it is," he said, and pointing with his garden-rough forefinger. "I.A.P.A. M.P. What can you make of that?"

I took the thing in my hands. The adhesive stamp customary in those days was defaced by a circular postmark, which bore the name of the office of departure and the

date. The impact in this particular case had been light or made without sufficient ink, and half the letters of the name had left no impression. I could distinguish—

HAF AMB

and very faintly below, D.S.Q.

I gazed the name in an instant flash of intuition. It was *Shaphambury*. The very gaps shaped that to my mind. Perhaps, in a sort of semi-visibility, other letters were there, at least hinting themselves. It was a place somewhere on the east coast, I knew, either in Norfolk or Suffolk.

"Why?" cried I—and stopped.

What was the good of telling him?

Old Stuart had glanced up sharply, I am inclined to think almost fearfully, into my face. "You—you haven't got it?" he said.

*Shaphambury*—I should remember that.

"You don't think you got it?" he said.

I handed the envelope back to him.

He replaced the letter in it and stood erect to put this back in his breast pocket.

I did not mean to take any risks in this affair. I drew a stump of pencil from my waistcoat pocket, traced a line away from him and wrote "*Shaphambury*" very quickly on my finger and rather gray cuff.

"Well," said I, with an air of having done nothing remarkable.

I turned to him with some unimportant observation—I have forgotten what.

I never finished whatever vague remark I commenced.

I looked up to see a third person waiting at the greenhouse door.

## VII

It was old Mrs. Verrall.

I wonder if I can convey the effect of her to you. She was a little old lady with extraordinarily flame hair. Her weak, upturned features were puffed up into an assumption of dignity, and she was richly dressed. I would like to underline that "*richly dressed*," or have the word printed in solid old English or Gothic lettering. No one so much as a new quill so richly dressed as she was, no one, old or young, indulges in so quiet and yet so profound a susceptibility. But you must not imagine any extravagance of outline or any beauty or richness of color. The predominant colors were black and far-browns, and the effect of richness was due entirely to the ex-

trous costume of the materials employed. She affected silk brocades with rich and elaborate patterns, priceless black lace over creamy or purple satin, intricate trimmings through which threads and bands of velvet wriggled, and in the winter, rare furs. Her gloves fitted exquisitely, and ostentatiously simple chains of fine gold and pearls, and a great number of bracelets, lined about her little person. One was forced to feel that the slightest article she wore cost more than all the wardrobe of a decent girl like Nettie; her bonnet affected the simplicity that is beyond rubies. Moreover, that is the first quality about that old lady that I would like to convey to you, and the second was cleanliness. You felt that old Mrs. Verrill was exquisitely clean. If you had boiled my poor, dear old mother in soda for a month you couldn't have got her so clean as Mrs. Verrill constantly and meticulously was. And, pervading all her presence, shone her third great quality, her manifest confidence in the respectful subordination of the world.

She was pale and a little out of breath that day, but without any loss of her ultimate confidence. It was clear to me that she had come to interview Stuart upon the outbreak of passion that had bridged the gulf between their families.

And here, again, I find myself writing in an unknown language, so far as my younger readers are concerned. You who know only the world that followed the Great Change will find much that I am telling incomprehensible. Upon these points I cannot appeal, so I have appealed for other confirmations, to the old newspapers; these were the things that no one wrote about because every one understood and every one had taken up an attitude.

There were in England and America, and indeed throughout the world, two great informal divisions of human beings—the Secure and the Insecure. There was not and never had been in either country a nobility *stricto sensu*, and remains, a common error that the British peers were noble. Neither in law nor custom were there noble families; and we altogether lacked the edification one found in Russia, for example, of a poor nobility. A peerage was an hereditary possession that, like the landed estate, concerned only the eldest son of a house; it implied no burden of noblest oblige. The rest of the world were as law and practice contrived—

and all America was common. But through the private ownership of land that had resulted from the neglect of feudal obligations in Britain, and the utter want of political foresight in the Americans, large masses of property had become artificially stable in the hands of a small minority, to whom it was necessary to mortgage all new public and private enterprises, and who were held together, not by any tradition of service and nobility, but the natural sympathy of common interests and a common large scale of living.

It was a class without any very definite boundaries. Vigorous individualities, by methods, for the most part, violent and questionable, were constantly thrusting themselves from insecurity to security, and the sons and daughters of secure people, by marrying insecurely or by wild extravagance or flagrant vice, would sink into the life of anxiety and insufficiency which was the ordinary life of man. The rest of the population was landless, and except by working directly or indirectly for the Secure, had no legal right to order. And such was the shallowness and haphazardness of our thought, such the stifled expanse of all our feelings before the Last Days, that very few, indeed, of the Secure could be found to doubt that this was the natural and only conceivable order of the world.

It is the life of the Insecure under the old order that I am displaying, and I hope that I am conveying something of its hopeless bitterness to you, but you must not imagine that the Secure lived free of paradoxical happiness. The pit of insecurity below them made itself felt, even though it was not comprehended. Life about them was ugly; the sight of ugly and mean houses, of ill-dressed people, the vulgar appeals of the dealers in popular commodities, were not to be escaped. There was below the threshold of their minds an uneasiness, they not only did not think clearly about social economy but they displayed an instinctive disinclination to think. Their security was not so perfect that they had not a dread of falling toward the pit. They were always hushing themselves by new topics, their cultivation of "connections," of interests, their desire to conform and improve their positions, was a constant ignoble preoccupation. You must read Thackeray to get the full flavor of their lives.

Then the bacchanal was apt to disregard

class distinctions, and they were never really happy in their servitude. Read their surviving books. Each generation breeds the decay of that "fidelity" of servants, no generation ever are. A world that is equal in one corner is squabbling altogether, but that they never understand. They believed there was not enough of anything to go round, they believed that this was the intention of God and an incurable condition of life, and they held passionately and with a sense of right, to their disproportionate share. They maintained a curious intolerance as "Society" of all who were practically secure, and their chance of that word is exhaustively eloquent of the quality of their philosophy.

But, if you can master these ideas upon which the old system rested, just in the same measure will you understand the horror these people had for marriage with the insecure. In the case of their girls and women it was extraneously run, and in the case of either sex it was regarded as a disastrous social crime. Anything was better than that.

You are probably aware of the hideous fate that was only too probably the lot, during those last dark days, of every girl of the insecure classes who loved and gave way to the impulse of self-abandonment without marriage, and so you will understand the peculiar situation of Nellie with young Verrill. One or the other had to suffer. And as they were both in a state of great emotional exaltation and capable of strange generalities toward each other, it was an open question and naturally a source of great anxiety to a mother in Mrs. Verrill's position, whether the sufferer might not be her son—whether as the outcome of that glowing, irresponsible conservatism, Nellie might not return prospective mistress of Checkhill Towers. The chances were greatly against that conclusion, but such things did occur.

These laws and customs sound, I know, like a record of some rusty-minded fanatic's inventions. They were inevitable facts in that vanished world into which, by some accident, I had been born, and it was the dream of any better state of things that was scouted as lunacy. Just think of it! This girl I loved with all my soul, for whom I was ready to sacrifice my life, was not good enough to marry young Verrill. And I had only to look at his eyes, handsome, characteristic face to perceive a creature weaker

and no better than myself. She was to be his pleasure until he chose to cast her aside and the poison of our social system had saturated her nature—his evening dress, his freedom and his money had seemed so fine to her and I so clothed in splendor—that to that prospect she had consented. And to prevent the social conventions that created their situation, was called "class envy," and gently born gentlemen reproached us for the mildest resentment against an injustice no living man would now either endure or consent to profit by.

What was the sense of saying "peace" when there was no peace? If there was one hope in the chambers of that old world it lay in revolt and conflict to the death.

But if you can really grasp the shameful grotesqueness of the old life, you will begin to appreciate the interpretation of old Mrs. Verrill's appearance that leaped up at once in my mind.

She had come to compromise the disaster!

And the Strauts would compromise! I saw that only too well.

An enormous disgust at the prospect of the imminent encounter between Stuart and his mistress made me behave in a violent and irrational way. I wanted to escape seeing that, seeing even Stuart's first gesture at that, at any cost.

"I'm off," said I, and turned my back on him without any farther farewell.

My line of retreat lay by the old lady, and so I advanced toward her.

I saw her expression change, her mouth fell a little way open, her forehead wrinkled, and her eyes grew round. She found me a queer customer even at the first sight, and there was something in the manner of my advance that took away her breath.

She stood on the top of the three or four steps that descended to the level of the hot-house floor. She needed a pace or two, with a certain offended dignity at the determination of my rash.

I gave her no sort of salutation.

Well, as a matter of fact, I did give her a sort of salutation. There is no occasion for me to begin apologizing now for the thing I said to her—I strip these things before you—if only I can get them stark enough you will understand and forgive. I was filled with a brutal and overpowering desire to insult her.

And so I addressed this poor, little, ex-

positive, old woman in the following terms, converting her by a violent metaphor into a comprehensive plural. "You infernal land thieves!" I said point-blank into her face, "Have you come to offer them money?"

And without waiting to test her powers of repartee, I passed rudely beyond her and vanished, striding with my feet clashed out of her world again.

I have tried since to imagine how the thing must have looked to her. So far as her particular universe went I had not existed at all, or I had existed only as a dim, black thing, an insignificant speck, far away across her park in an irrelevant, unimportant tract, until the moment when she came, suddenly brushed, into her own secure gardens and sought for Stuart among the greenhouses. Then, *thump!* I flashed into being down that green walk, brick-faced this as a black-armed, ill-clad young man, who first started, and then advanced, crowding toward her. Once in existence I developed rapidly. I grew larger in perspective and became more and more important and distinct every moment. I came up the steps with inconceivable humility and disrespect in my bearing, towered over her, becoming for an instant at least a sort of second French Revolution, and delivered myself, with the intensest concentration, of those wicked and incomprehensible words.

Just for a second, I threatened annihilation. Happily that was my climax.

And then I had gone by, and the Universe was very much as it had always been except for the wild swirl in it, and the faint sense of insecurity, my episode left in its wake.

The thing that never entered my head in those days was that a large proportion of the rich were rich in absolute good faith. I thought they saw things exactly as I saw them, and wickedly denied. But, indeed, old Mrs. Verrall was no more capable of doubting the perfection of her family's right to dominate a wide countryside, than she was of examining the Thirty-nine Articles or dealing with any other of the astronomical pillars upon which her universe rested in security.

No doubt I started and frightened her tremendously. But she could not understand.

None of her sort of people ever did seem to understand such bold flashes of hate, as ever and again lit the crowded darkness before their feet. The thing leaped out of the black for a moment and vanished, like a threatening figure by a desolate roadside, lit for a moment by one's belated carriage lamp and then swallowed up by the night. They counted it with nightmares, and did their best to forget what was evidently as insignificant as it was disturbing.

#### CHAPTER THE FOURTH—WILL

##### I



FROM that moment when I realized old Mrs. Verrall I became representative, I was a man who stood for all the disenchanted of the world. I had no hope of pride or pleasure left in me, I was raging rebellion against God and mankind. There were no more vague intentions swaying me this way and that; I was perfectly clear now upon what I meant to do.

I would make my protest and die. I was going to kill Nettie—Nettie who had seduced and promised and then given herself to another, and who stood now for all the conceivable delugefulnesses the lost imagination of the youthful heart, the unattainable

joys in life; and Verrall who stood for all who profited by the incurable injustice of our social order. I would kill them both. And thus being done, I would blow my brains out and see what vengeance followed my black refusal to live.

So guided I was resolved. I surged monstrously. And above me, glowing the stars, triumphant over the yellow, waxing moon that followed below, the great meteor toward up toward the zenith.

"Let me only kill!" I cried. "Let me only kill!"

So I shivered in my frenzy. I was in a fever that defied hunger and fatigue; for a long time I prowled over the heath toward Lowchester talking to myself, and now that night had fully come, I was snatching homeward, walking the long seventeen miles without a thought of rest. And I had eaten nothing since the morning.

"I suppose I must count myself mad, but I can recall my savings."

There were times when I walked weeping through that brightness that was neither night nor day. There were times when I measured in a topsy-turvy fashion with what I called the Spirit of All Things. But always I spoke in that white glory in the sky.

"Why am I here only to suffer ignominy?" I asked. "Why have you made me with pride that cannot be satisfied, with desires that turn and rend me? Is it a jest, this world—a joke you play on your guests? I—even I—have a better humor than that!"

"Why not learn from me a certain decency of mercy? Why not undo? Have I ever tormented, day by day, some wretched woman, making life for it to trail through, life that disgusts it, starving it, bruising it, mocking it? Why should You? Your jokes are clumsy. Try—try some milder fun up there; do you hear? Something that doesn't hurt so infernally."

"You say this is your purpose—your purpose with me. You are making something with me—birth pains of a soul! Ah! How can I believe you? You forget I have eyes for other things. Let my own case go, but what of that frog beneath the rust wheel, God?—and the bird the rat has torn?"

And after such blasphemies I would fling out a ridiculous little debating-society hard, "Answer me that!"

A week ago it had been moonlight, white and black and hard across the spaces of the park, but now the light was livid and full of the quality of hate. An extraordinarily low, white mist, not three feet above the ground, drifted knowingly across the grass, and the trees rose ghostly out of that phantom sea. Great and shadowy and strange was the world that night. No one seemed abroad; I and my little cracked voice drifted solitary through the silent mysteries. Sometimes I argued as I have told, sometimes I shuffled along in moodily vacuity, sometimes my torment was vivid and acute.

Sharply, out of upsthy, would come a boisterous paroxysm of fury, when I thought of Nettle mocking me and laughing, and of her and Verrill clasped in each other's arms.

"I will not have it so!" I screamed. "I will not have it so!"

And in one of these raving fits, I drew my revolver from my pocket and fired it into the quiet night. Three times I did it.

The bullets tore through the air, the startled trees told one another in diminishing echoes the thing I had done, and then, with a slow finality, the vast and patient night healed again to calm. My shots, my curses and blasphemies, my prayers—for since I prayed—that silence took them all.

It was—how can I express it?—a stifled outcry transfigured, lost, and the severe assumption, the overbalancing stroke of that brightness. The noise of my shots, the impact upon things, had, for the instant, been enormous, then it had passed away. I found myself standing with the revolver held up, astonished, my emotions penetrated by something I could not understand. Then I looked up over my shoulder at the great star, and remained staring at it.

"Who are you?" I said at last.

I was like a man in a solitary desert who has suddenly heard a voice.

That, too, passed.

As I came over Clayton Crest I recall that I missed the multitude that now, night after night, walked out to stare at the comet, and the little preacher in the waste beyond the boardings, who warned sinners to repent before the Judgment, was not in his usual place.

It was long past midnight, and every one had gone home. But I did not think of this at first, and the solitude perplexed me and left a memory behind. The gas lamps were all extinguished because of the brightness of the comet, and that, too, was unfamiliar. The little news agent in still High Street had shut up and gone to bed, but one belated board had been put out late and forgotten, and it still bore its placard.

The word upon it—there was but one word upon it in staring letters—was, "WAR."

You figure that empty, mean street, empty echoing to my footsteps, no soul awake and sufficient but me. Then my halt at the placard. And amidst that sleeping stiffness, occurred hastily upon the board, a little askew and crumpled, but quite distinct beneath that cool, meteoric glare, portentous and appalling, the remorseless evil of that word—

"WAR!"

## II

I awoke in that state of equanimity that so often follows an emotional thrashing.

It was late, and my mother was beside my bed. She had some breakfast for me on a battered tray.

"Don't get up yet, dear," she said. "You've been sleeping. It was three o'clock when you got home last night. You must have been tired out. Your poor face," she went on, "was as white as a sheet, and your eyes shining. It frightened me to let you in. And you stumbled on the stairs."

My eye went quickly to my coat pocket, where something still bulged. She probably had not noticed. "I went to Chesham," I said. "You know—perhaps—?"

"I got a letter last evening, dear." She bent over me to put the tray upon my knees, and she kissed my hair softly. For a moment we both remained still, resting on that, her cheek just touching my head.

I took the tray from her to end the pause.

"Don't touch my clothes, mamma," I said sharply, as she moved toward them. "I'm still equal to a clothesbrush."

And then, as she turned away, I astonished her by saying: "You dear mother, you! A letter—I understand. Only—now—dear mother; oh! let me be! Let me be!"

And, with the docility of a good servant, she went from me. Dear heart of rebellion that the world and I had used to!

It seemed to me that morning that I could never give way to a gust of passion again. A serried firmness of mind possessed me. My purpose seemed now as inflexible as iron; there was neither love nor hate nor fear left in me—only I pitied my mother greedily for all that was still to come. I ate my breakfast slowly, and thought where I could find out about Shaphambury, and how I might hope to get there. I had not five shillings in the world.

I dressed methodically, choosing the least layed of my collars, and shaving much more carefully than was my wont, then I went down to the public library to consult a map.

Shaphambury was on the coast of Essex, a long and complicated journey from Clifton. I went to the railway station and made some memoranda from the timetables. The porters I asked were not very

clear about Shaphambury, but the booking-office clerk was helpful, and we puzzled out all I wanted to learn. Then I came out into the cold street again. At the least I ought to have two pounds.

I went back to the public library and into the newspaper room to think over this problem.

A fact intruded itself upon me. People seemed in an altogether exceptional stir about the morning journals. There was something unusual in the air of the room; more people and more talking than usual, and for a moment I was puzzled. Then I brought me, "This war with Germany, of course!" A naval battle was supposed to be in progress in the North Sea. Let them! I returned to the consideration of my own affairs.

## Parkard?

Could I go and make it up with him, and then borrow? I weighed the chances of that. Then I thought of asking or pawning something, but that seemed difficult. My water overcoat had not cost a pound when it was new; my watch was not likely to fetch many shillings. Still, both these things might be factors. I thought with a certain repugnance of the little store my mother was probably making for the rent. She was very secretive about that, and it was locked in an old tea caddy in her bedroom. I knew it would be almost impossible to get any of that money from her willingly, and, though I told myself that in this issue of passion and death no detail mattered, I could not get rid of tormenting scruples whenever I thought of that tea caddy. Was there no other course? Perhaps, after every other source had been tapped, I might supplement with a few shillings frankly begged from her. "These others," I said to myself, thinking without passion for once of the sons of the Secours, "would find it difficult to run their romances on a pawnshop loan. However, we must manage it."

I felt the day was passing on, but I did not get excited about that. "Slow is swift," Parkard used to say, and I meant to get everything thought out completely, to take a long aim and then to act as a bullet flies.

I hesitated at a pawnshop on my way home to my midday meal, but I determined not to pledge my watch until I could bring my overcoat also.

I ate silently, revolving plans.

(To be continued.)





Illustration by H. H. H. H.

ONE WAITED FOR ITS RISING, AND YET EACH NIGHT IT CAME AS A SURPRISE

(See "On the Days of the Comet," page 101)



# In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

## BOOK THE FIRST—THE COMET

### CHAPTER THE FOURTH—WELL—(CONTINUED)

SCARRED. The narrator, William Leadford, is telling of events in his youth before the Great Change. Through his friend Parload he has become a seer, and is also interested in a great secret whose path is approaching the earth's orbit. This fact is more important to him than the spread of socialism, for what will happen if the comet strikes the earth? Meanwhile, times are bad in England, owing to war, sickness, lack of food, overproduction, and the invasion of American products in the market. And, besides, war has just broken out between England and Germany. Leadford has been engaged to marry Fannie Stuart, but she has broken with him on account of his beliefs. The young man still loves the girl and conspires to visit her. On one of these visits he learns that she has eloped with Edward Vernon, the son of her father's employer. The couple have gone to a resort on the east coast. Obeying some vague impulse, Leadford has recently bought a revolver. The idea of following his sweetheart now comes to his mind, but to do this he will have to prove some of his belongings.

### III

**A**FTER our midday dinner—it was a potato pie, mostly potato with some scraps of cabbage and bacon—I put on my overcoat and got it out of the house while my mother was in the scullery at the back.

A scullery in the old world was, in the case of such houses as ours, a damp, miserable, mainly subterranean region behind the dark living-room kitchen. It was ren-

dered more than typically dirty in our case by the fact that into it the coal cellar, a yawning pit of black uncleanness, opened, and diffused small, crumblike particles about the uneven brick floor. It was the region of "washing up," that greasy, damp function that followed every meal. Its atmosphere had over a cooking staidness, and the memory of boiled cabbage, and the sooty, black stains where saucepan or kettle had been put down for a minute, scraps of potato peel caught by the rimmer of an escape pipe, and mops of a quite indecipherable horribleness of acquisition, called "dishcloths," rose in my memory at the

room. The shut of this place was the "ink," a tank of stone, resulting to a refined touch, grave lined and unpleasant to see. Above this was a tap for cold water, so arranged that when the water descended it splashed and rattled whoever had turned it on. This tap was our water supply. And in such a place you must fancy a little old woman, rather incompetent and very gentle, a soul of unselfishness and sacrifice, in dirty clothes, all come from their original colors to a common dusty dark gray, in worn, ill-fitting boots, with hands distorted by ill use, and untidily graying hair—my mother. In the winter her hands would be "chapped," and she would have a cough. And while she washes up I go out, to sell my overcoat and watch in order that I may desert her.

I forget how much money I got, but I remember that it was rather less than the sum I had made out to be the single fare to Southampton.

I got back home about five minutes to three, resolved to start by the first train for Birmingham in any case, but still dissatisfied about my money. I thought of pressing a book or something of that sort, but I could think of nothing of obvious value in the house. My mother's silver—two gravy-spoons and a salt-reiller—had been pawned for some weeks, since, in fact, the June quarter-day. But my mind was full of hypothetical opportunities.

As I came up the steps to our door, I remarked that Mr. Gabbins looked at me suddenly round his dull red curtains with a set of slanted resolutions in his eye and vanished, and as I walked along the passage, he opened his door upon me suddenly and intercepted me.

He was in the clerical dress of that time, that costume that seems almost the strongest of all our old-world clothing, and he presented it in an ill-chaperoned form—black, of a poor texture, ill fitting, strangely cut. His long shirt accentuated the baldness of his head, the clearness of his face. The white tie below his ill-round collar, beneath his innocent, large-spectacled face, was a little grubby, and between his not very clean teeth he held a briar pipe. His complexion was whitish, and although he was only thirty-three or four perhaps, his sandy hair was already thinning from the top of his head.

To your eye, now, he would seem the

strongest figure, in the utter disregard of all physical beauty or dignity about him. You would find him extraordinarily odd, but, in the old days, he met not only with acceptance but respect. He was alive until within a year or so ago, but his later appearance changed. As I saw him that afternoon, he was a very shrewdly, ugly little human being. You had an instinctive sense that so he had been from the beginning. You felt he was not only drifting through life eating what came in his way, believing what came in his way, doing without any vigor what came in his way, but that into life also he had drifted. You could not believe him the child of pride and high resolve, or of any splendid passion of love. He had just happened. But we all happened then. Why am I taking this time over this poor little curio in particular?

"Hello!" he said, with an assumption of friendly ease. "Haven't seen you for weeks? Come in and have a smoke."

An invitation from the drawing-room lodger was in the nature of a command. I would have liked very greatly to have refused it. Never was invitation more importunate. But I had not the wit to think of an excuse. "All right," I said awkwardly, and he held the door open for me.

"I'd be very glad if you would," he amplified. "One doesn't get much opportunity of intelligent talk in this parish."

What the devil was he up to, was my secret preoccupation. He flamed about me with a nervous hospitality, talking in jermy fragments, rubbing his hands together, and taking pipe-stems over and round his glasses.

"They're going to give us trouble in the North Sea, it seems," he remarked with a sort of innocent zest. "I'm glad they mean fighting."

There was an air of culture about his room that always cured me, and that made me restrained even on this occasion. The table under the window was littered with photographic material and the later albums of his Continental sojourns. On the American cloth-covered shelves that lined the recesses on either side of the fireplace were what I used to think in those days a quite incredible number of books—perhaps eight hundred altogether, including the retired gentleman's photograph albums and college and school text-books. This suggestion of learning was enhanced by the little wooden shield bearing a col-



Illustration by J. M. W. Turner.

IT TURNED OUR VERY BRILLIANT INDUSTRIAL TOWNS TO GHOSTLY CITIES



*Drawn by Stuart Davis.*

SEE FIRST A LETTER THAT TOLD STEPHEN HOW TO TAKE REPAIRS AND THEN BY THE BEACH

large sort of urns that hung over the looking-glass, and by a photograph of Mr. Gibbitts in cap and gown in an Oxford frame that adorned the opposite wall. And in the middle of that wall stood his writing-desk, which I knew to have pigeonholes when it was open, and which made him seem not merely cultured, but literary. At that, he wrote sermons, composing them himself.

"Yes," he said, taking possession of the hearth rug, "the war had to come sooner or later. If we smother their feet for them now, well, there's an end to the matter?"

He stood on his toes, and then humped down on his heels, and looked blindly through his spectacles at a water color in his sister—the subject was a bunch of umbrellas—above the sideboard which was his pantry and tea chest and cellar. "Yes," he said as he did so.

I coughed, and wondered how I might presently get away.

He invited me to smoke—that queer old practice—and then when I declined, began talking in a confidential tone of this "damned business" of the strikes. "The war won't improve that outlook," he said, and was very grave for a moment.

He spoke of the want of thought for their wives and children shown by the colleges in striking merely for the sake of the union, and this stirred me to controversy, and distracted me a little from my resolution to escape.

"I don't quite agree with that," I said, clearing my throat. "If the men didn't strike for the union now, if they let that be broken up, where would they be when the pinch of reduction did come?"

To which he replied that they couldn't

expect to get top-price wages when the masters were selling bottom-price coal. I replied: "That isn't it. The masters don't treat them fairly. They have to protect themselves."

To which Mr. Gabbitus answered: "Well, I don't know. I've been in the Four Towns some time, and I must say I don't think the balance of injustice falls on the masters' side."

"It falls on the men," I agreed, withilly misunderstanding him.

And as we worked our way toward an argument, "Confound this argument!" I thought, but I had no skill in self-extraction, and my irritation crept into my voice. Three little spots of color came into the cheeks and nose of Mr. Gabbitus, but his voice showed nothing of his ruffled temper.

"You see," I said, "I'm a socialist. I don't think this world was made for a small minority to dance on the horns of everyone else."

"My dear fellow," said the Reverend Mr. Gabbitus, "I'm a socialist too. Who isn't? But that doesn't lead me to class hatred."

"You haven't felt the heat of this confounded system, I have."

"Ah!" said he, and catching him on that note came a rap at the front door, and, as he hung suspended, the sound of my mother letting some one in and a timed rap.

"Now," thought I, and stood up, resolutely, but he would not let me. "No, no, no!" said he. "It's only for the Durvas money."

He put his hand against my chest with an effect of physical compulsion, and said, "Come in!"

"Our talk's just getting interesting," he protested; and there entered Miss Ramsell, an elderly little lady who was mighty in church help in Clayton.

He greeted her—the talk he took to notice of me—and went to his bureau, and I remained standing by my chair but unable to get out of the room. "I'm not interrupting," asked Miss Ramsell.

"Not in the least," he said, darning out the carriage and opening his desk. I could not help seeing what he did.

I was so fretted by my impotence to leave him, that, at the moment, it did not connect at all with the research of the morning that he was taking out money. I listened silently to his talk with Miss Ramsell, and saw only, as they say in Wales, with the

front of my eyes, the small flat drawer that had, it seemed, quite a number of sovereigns scattered over its floor. "They're so unreasonable," complained Miss Ramsell. Who could be otherwise in a social organization that bordered on insanity?

I turned away from them, put my foot on the fender, stuck my elbow on the plain-fringed mantelpiece, and studied the photographs, pipes, and ash trays that adorned it. What was it I had to think out before I went to the station?

Of course! My mind made a queer, little, reluctant leap; it felt like being forced to leap over a bottomless chasm, and alighted upon the coverings that were just disappearing again as Mr. Gabbitus shut his drawer.

"I won't interrupt your talk further," said Miss Ramsell, receding downcast.

Mr. Gabbitus played round her politely, and opened the door for her and conducted her into the passage, and for a moment or so I had the fullest sense of proximity to doom—it seemed to me there must be ten or twelve sovereigns.

The front door closed and he returned. My chance of escape had gone.

#### IV

"I must be going," I said, with a curiously reinforced desire to get away out of that room.

"My dear chap?" he insisted, "I can't think of it. Surely, there's nothing to call you away." Then with an evident desire to shift the venue of our talk, he asked, "You never told me what you thought of Burke's little book?"

I was now, beneath my dull display of submission, furiously angry with him. It occurred to me to ask myself why I should defer and qualify my opinions to him. Why should I preserve a feeling of intellectual and social inferiority toward him? He asked what I thought of Burke—I resolved to tell him, if necessary, with arrogance. Then perhaps he would release me. I did not sit down again, but stood by the corner of the fireplace.

"That was the little book you lent me last summer?" I said.

"He reasons closely, eh?" he said, and indicated the armchair with a flat hand, and leaned persuasively.

I remained standing. "I didn't think much of his reasoning powers," I said.

"He was one of the cleverest bishops-London ever had."

"That may be. But he was doling about in a jolly frolic case," said I.

"You mean?"

"That he's wrong. I don't think he proves his case. I don't think Christianity is true. He knows himself for the pretender he is. His reasoning—no—"

Mr. Gabbins wore, I think, a shock paler than his wont, and profusion vanished from his manner. His eyes and mouth were round, his face seemed to get round, his eyebrows curved at my remarks.

"I'm sorry you think that," he said at last, with a catch in his breath.

He did not repeat his suggestion that I should sit. He made a step or so toward the window and turned. "I suppose you will admit—" he began, with a faintly irritating note of intellectual condescension.

I will not tell you of his arguments or mine. You will find, if you care to look for them, in out-of-the-way corners of our book museums, the shricked cheap publications—the publications of the Rationalist Press Association, for example—on which my arguments were based. Lying in that curious limbo with them, mixed up with them and indistinguishable, are the endless "Replies" of orthodoxy, like the rotting dead in some hard-fought trench. All those disputes of our fathers, and they were sometimes furious disputes, have gone now beyond the range of comprehension. You younger people, I know, read them with impatient perplexity. You cannot understand how sane creatures could imagine they had joined issue at all in most of those controversies. All the old methods of systematic thinking, the queer abstractions of the Aristotelian logic, have followed magic numbers and mystical numbers, and the Rosenspietziach magic of names, run into the blackness of the unthinkable. You can no more understand our theological posings than you can understand the lunacies that made all ancient peoples speak of their gods only by circumlocutions, that made savages pine away and die because they had been photographed, or an Ellarbanus farmer men back from a day's expedition because he had met three cows. Even I, who have been through it all, re-

call our controversies now with something near irony.

Faith we can understand to-day; all men live by faith. But, in the old time, every one confused quite hopelessly faith and a forced, incredible belief in certain particular concrete statements. I am inclined to say that neither believers nor unbelievers had faith as we understand it; they had insufficient intellectual power. They could not trust unless they had something to see and touch and say, like their barbarous ancestors who could not make a bargain without exchange of tokens. If they no longer worshiped stocks and stones, or clad out their needs with pilgrimages and images, they still held fiercely to visible images, to printed words and formulas.

But why revive the echoes of the ancient logomachies?

Suffice it that we lost our tempers very readily in pursuit of God and truth, and said exquisitely foolish things on either side. And on the whole—from the impartial perspective of my three and seventy years—I adjudicate that if my dialectic was bad, that of the Reverend Mr. Gabbins was altogether worse.

Little pink spots came into his cheeks, a squalling note into his voice. We interrupted each other more and more rudely. We invented facts and appealed to authorities whose names I mispronounced, and, finding Mr. Gabbins shy of the higher criticism and the Germans, I used the names of Karl Marx and Engels as Bible verses with no little effect. A silly wrangle! a preposterous wrangle! You must imagine our talk becoming louder, with a developing quarrelsome note—my mother, no doubt, hovering on the staircase and listening in alarm as who should say: "My dear, don't offend it! Oh, don't offend it! Mr. Gabbins enjoys its friendship. Try to think whatever Mr. Gabbins says—" though we still kept in touch with a pretense of mutual deference. The ethical superiority of Christianity to all other religions came to the fore—I know not how. We dealt with the matter in bold, imaginative generalizations, because of the insufficiency of our historical knowledge. I was moved to denounce Christianity as the ethics of slaves, and declare myself a disciple of a German writer of no little note in those days, named Nietzsche.

For a dozen I must confess I was per-

intimately ill acquainted with the works of the master. Indeed, all I knew of him had come to me through a two-column article in "The Clarion" for the previous week. But the Reverend Mr. Gabbins did not read "The Clarion."

I am, I know, putting a strain upon your credulity when I tell you that I now have little doubt that the Reverend Mr. Gabbins was absolutely ignorant even of the name of Nietzsche, although that writer presented a separate and distinct attitude of attack upon the faith that was in the several gentlemen's keeping.

"I'm a disciple of Nietzsche," said I, with an air of extensive explanation.

He shied away so awkwardly at the name that I repeated it at once.

"But do you know what Nietzsche says?" I pressed him viciously.

"He has certainly been adequately answered," said he, still trying to carry it off.

"Who by?" I rapped out hotly. "Tell me that!" and became tremendously expectant.

## V

A happy accident relieved Mr. Gabbins from the embarrassment of that challenge, and carried me another step along my course of personal disaster.

It came on the heels of my question in the form of a clatter of horses without, and the gride and creaking of wheels. I glimpsed a straw-hatted coachman and a pair of grays. It seemed an incredibly magnificent carriage for Clorton.

"Eh!" said the Reverend Mr. Gabbins, going to the window. "Why, it's old Mrs. Verrall! It's old Mrs. Verrall. Really! What can she want with me?"

He turned to me, and the flush of controversy had passed and his face shone like the sun. It was not every day, I perceived, that Mrs. Verrall came to see him.

"I get so many interruptions," he said, almost grinning. "You must excuse me a minute! Then—then I'll tell you about that fellow. But don't go. I pray you don't go. I can assure you—most interesting."

He went out of the room waving vague, prohibitory gestures.

"I must go," I cried after him.

"No, no, no!" in the passage. "I've got your answer," I think it was he added, and "quite mistaken," and I saw him crouching down the steps to talk to the old lady.

I swore. I made three steps to the window, and that brought me within a yard of that accursed driver.

I glanced at it, and then at that old woman who was so absurdly powerful, and instantly her son and Nettie's face were flaring in my brain. The Stars had, no doubt, already accepted accomplished facts. And I too—

What was I doing here?

What was I doing here while judgment crept me?

I woke up. I was injected with energy. I took one reassuring look at the coach's obsequious back, at the old lady's projected nose and quivering hand, and then with swift, clean movements I had the little driver open, four swordgrips in my pocket, and the driver shut again. Then again at the window—they were still talking.

That was all right. He might not look in that driver for hours. I glanced at his clock. Twenty minutes still before the Birmingham train. Time to buy a pair of boots and get away. But how was I to get to the station?

I went out boldly into the passage, and took my hat and stick. Walk boldly past him?

Yes. That was all right! He could not argue with me while so important a person engaged him. I came down the steps.

"I want a lie made, Mr. Gabbins, of all the really alarming cases," old Mrs. Verrall was saying.

It is curious, but it did not occur to me that here was a mother whose son I was going to kill. I did not see her in that aspect at all. Instead, I was possessed by a realization of the blinding insubricity of a social system that gave this palmed old woman the power to give, or withhold, the urgent necessities of life from hundreds of her fellow-creatures just according to her pease, loathly old fancies of desert.

"We could make a *profession* list of that sort," he was saying, and glanced round with a preoccupied expression at me.

"I must go," I said at his flash of inquiry, and added, "I'll be back in twenty minutes," and went on my way. He turned again to his patroness as though he forgot me on the instant. Perhaps after all he was not sorry.

I felt extraordinarily cool and capable, exhilarated, if anything, by this prompt, effertful theft. After all, my great deter-



minution would achieve itself. I was no longer opposed by a sense of obstacles; I felt I could grasp accidents and turn them to my advantage. I would now go down Hacker Street to the little shoemaker's—get a sound, good pair of boots—ten minutes—and then to the railway station—five minutes more—and off! I felt as efficient and non-moral as if I was Nietzsche's super-man already come. It did not occur to me that the curate's clock might have a considerable margin of error.

## VI

I missed the train.

Partly, that was because the curate's clock was slow, and partly, it was due to the commercial obstinacy of the shoemaker, who would try on another pair after I had declared my time was up. I bought the final pair, however, gave him a wrong address for the return of the old ones, and only ceased to feel like the Misanthropic super-man when I saw the train running out of the station.

Even then I did not lose my head. It occurred to me almost at once that, in the event of a prompt pursuit, there would be a great advantage in not taking a train from Clayton; that, indeed, to have done so would have been an error from which only luck had saved me. As it was, I had already been very instructed in my inquiries about Shaphambury; for, once on the scene, the clerk could not fail to remember me. Now the chances were against his coming into the case. I did not go into the station, therefore, at all; I made no demonstration of having missed the train, but walked quietly past, down the road, crossed the iron footbridge, and took the way back circuitously by White's brick fields and the allotments to the way over Clayton Crest to Two-Mile Stone, where I calculated I should have an ample margin for the day train.

I was not very greatly excited or alarmed then. Suppose, I reasoned, that by some accident the curate goes to that drawer at once: will he be certain to miss four out of ten or eleven sovereigns? If he does, will he at once think I have taken them? If he does, will he act at once or wait for my return? If he acts at once, will he talk to my mother or call in the police? Then there are

a dozen roads and even railways out of the Clayton region, how is he to know which I have taken? Suppose he goes straight at once to the right station, they will not remember my departure for the simple reason that I didn't depart. But they may remember about Shaphambury? It was unlikely.

I resolved not to go directly to Shaphambury from Birmingham, but to go thence to Monkharpsen, thence to Wyvern, and then come down on Shaphambury from the north. That might involve a night at some intermediate stopping place, but it would effectually conceal me from any but the most persistent pursuit. And this was not a case of murder yet, but only the theft of four sovereigns.

I had argued away all anxiety before I reached Clayton Crest.

At the Crest I looked back. What a world it was! And suddenly it came to me that I was looking at this world for the last time. If I overtook the fugitives and succeeded, I should die with them—or hang. I stopped and looked back more attentively at that wide, ugly valley.

It was my native valley, and I was going out of it, I thought, never to return, and yet in that last prospect, the group of towns that had borne me and dwarfed and crippled and made me, seemed, in some indefinable manner, strange. I was, perhaps, more used to seeing it from this comprehensive view-point when it was veiled and softened by night; now it came out in all its work-day rock, under a clear afternoon sun. That may account a little for its unfamiliarity. And perhaps, too, there was something in the emotions through which I had been passing for a week and more, to intensify my insight, to enable me to pierce the usual, to question the accepted. But it came to me then, I am sure, for the first time, how promiscuous, how higgledy-piggledy was the whole of that jumble of masses and forms, rollers and pot-banks, railway muck, marsh, schools, farms and that farmhouse, churches, chapels, allotment hedges, a vast, irregular agglomeration of ugly, smoking accidents in which men lived as happy as frogs in a dust bin. Each thing jostled and damaged the other things about it, each thing ignored the other things about it. The smoke of the furnace defiled the pot-bank clay, the clutter of the railway defiled the worshippers in church, the

public house thrust corruption at the school doors, the distasteful houses squandered miserably amidst the monstrosities of indigestion, with an effect of grasping imbecility.

I did not think these things clearly that afternoon. Much less did I ask how I, with my mendacious purpose, stood to them all. I went down that realization of disorder and suffocation here and now, as though I had thought it, but, indeed, then I only felt it, felt it momentarily as I looked back, and then stood with the thing escaping from my mind.

I should never see that countryside again. I came back to that. At any rate I wasn't sorry. The chambers were I should die in sweet air, under a clean sky. Then, as I turned to go on, I thought of my mother.

It seemed an evil world in which to leave one's mother. My thoughts focused upon her very vividly for a moment. Down there, under that afternoon light, she was going to and fro, unaware as yet that she had lost me, bent and poking about in the darkling underground kitchen, perhaps carrying a lamp into the scullery to trim, or sitting patiently, staring into the fire, waiting tea for me. A great pity for her, a great remorse at the blacker troubles that lowered over her innocent head, came to me. Why, after all, was I doing this thing?

Why?

I stopped again dead, with the half-crost rising between me and home. I had more than half a mind to return to her.

Then I thought of the curate's avowals. If he had intended them already, what should I return to? And even if I returned, how could I put them back?

And what of the night after I renounced my revenge? What of the three when young Verrall came back? And Nellie?

No! The thing had to be done.

But, at least, I might have kissed my mother before I came away, left her some message, reassured her, at least for a little while. All night she would listen and wait for me.

Should I send her a telegram from Two-Mile Stone?

It was no good now; too late, too late. To do that would be to tell the course I had taken, to bring pursuit upon me, swift and sure, if pursuit there was to be. No. My mother must suffer!

I went on grimly toward Two-Mile Stone, but now as if some greater will than mine directed my footsteps thither.

I reached Birmingham before darkness came, and just caught the last train for Monkshampton, where I had planned to pass the night.

## CHAPTER THE FIFTH—THE PURSUIT OF THE TWO LOVERS

### I



As the train carried me on from Birmingham to Monkshampton, it carried me not only into a country where I had never been before, but out of the commonplace daylight and the touch and quality of ordinary things, into the strange, unprecedented night that was ruled by the giant interior of the last days.

There was, at that time, a curious accretion of the common alternation of night and day. They became separated with a widening difference of value in regard to all mundane affairs. During the day, the comet was an item in the newspapers; it was jested by a thousand most long interests; it was as nothing in the days of the war-storm that was now upon

us. It was an astronomical phenomenon, somewhere away over China, millions of miles away in the depths. We forgot it. But directly the sun sank, one turned over and again toward the east, and the meteor assumed its awe over us.

One waited for its rising, and yet each night it came as a surprise. Always, it rose brighter than one had dared to think, always larger and with some wonderful change in its outline, and now with strange, less luminous, grimmer disc upon it that grew with its growth, the umbra of the earth. It shone also with its own light, so that this shadow was not hard or black, but it shone phosphorescently and with a diminishing intensity where the stimulus of the sun's rays was withdrawn. As it accented toward the zenith, as the last trailing daylight went after the abdicating sun, its greenish-white illumination bathed the realities of day and diffused a bright

ghostliness over all things. It changed the starless sky about it to an extraordinary deep blue, the predominant color in the world, such as I have never seen before or since. I remember, too, that as I peered from the train that was rattling on along to Monkshampton, I perceived and was puzzled by a rosy-red light that mingled with all the shadows that were cast by it.

It turned our ugly English industrial towns to phantom cities. Every where, the local authorities discontinued street lighting—one could read small print in the glare—and so, at Monkshampton, I went about through pale, white, unfamiliar streets, where electric globes had shadows on the path. In windows here and there burnt ruddy orange, like holes cut in some dream-curtains that hung before a furnace. A policeman with molasses hair showed me an iron screen of moonshine, which a green-faced man opened to us, and there I shuddered right. And the next morning, it opened with a mighty clatter, and was a dirty little locomotive that stank of beer, and there was a fat and giddy landlord with red spots upon his neck, and much noisy traffic going by on the cobbles outside.

I came out, after I had paid my bill, into a street that echoed to the howlings of two news-boys and to the noisy yappings of a dog they had raised to emulation. They were shouting: "Great British disaster in the North Sea. A battleship lost with all hands!"

I bought a paper, and went on to the railway station reading such details as were given of this triumph of the old civilization, of the blowing up of this great iron dog, full of guns and explosives and the most costly and beautiful machinery of which that time was capable, together with one hundred able-bodied men, all of them above the average, by a contact mine towed by a German submarine. I read myself into a fever of warlike emotion. Not only did I forget the meteor, but for a time I forgot even the purpose that took me on to the railway station. I thought my ticket and was crowded to Southampton.

So the hot day came to its own again, and people forgot the night.

Each night, there shone upon us more and more insistently, beauty, wonder, the promise of the days, and we were washed, and married for a space. And at the first gray sounds of dawn again, at the shuffling

of bolts and the noise of milk carts, we forgot, and the dusty, habitual day came yawning and stretching back again. The stains of coal smoke crept across the heavens, and we rose to the soiled, disorderly routine of life.

"Thus life has always been," we said, "thus it will always be."

The glory of these nights was almost universally regarded as spectacular merecy. It signified nothing to us. So far as western Europe went, it was only a small and ignorant section of the lower classes who regarded the comet as a portent of the end of the world. Abroad, where there were peasants, it was different, but in England the peasantry had already disappeared. Everyone read. The newspaper, in the quiet days, before our swift quarrel with Germany rushed to its climax, had absolutely dispelled all possibilities of a panic in this matter. The very tramps upon the highways, the children in the nursery, had learned, that at the utmost the whole of that shining cloud could weigh but a few score tons. This fact had been shown quite conclusively by the numerous deflections that had, at last, swung it round squarely at our world. It had passed near three of the smallest asteroids without producing the minutest perceptible deflection in their course, while, on its own part, it had described a course through nearly three degrees. When it struck our earth there was to be a magnificent spectacle, no doubt, for those who were on the right side of our planet to see, but beyond that nothing. It was doubtful whether we were on the right side. The meteor would look larger and larger in the sky, but with the umbra of our earth eating its heart of brightness out, and at last it would be the whole sky, a sky of luminous, green clouds, with a white brightness about the horizon, west and east. Then a pause—a pause of not very exactly defined duration—and then, no doubt, a great blaze of shooting stars. They might be of some unexpected color, because of the unknown element that lay in the green revealed. For a little while, the earth would spend shooting stars. Some, it was hoped, would reach the earth and be available for analysis.

That, science said, would be all. The green clouds would whirl and vanish, and there might be thunderstorms. But, through the attenuated ships of comets

shine, the old sky, the old stars, would disappear, and all would be as it had been before. And since this was to happen between one and eleven in the morning of the approaching Tuesday—I slept at Monkshampton on Saturday night—it would be only partially visible, if visible at all, on our side of the earth. Perhaps, if it came late, one would see no more than a shooting star low down in the sky. All this we had with the utmost assurance of science. Still, it did not prevent the last night being the most beautiful and memorable of human experiences.

The night had become very warm, and when, next day, I had ranged Shapsham-bury in vain, I was greatly comforted, as that unparalleled glory of the night returned, to think that under its splendid benediction young Vernal and Nettie made love to each other.

I walked backward and forward, backward and forward, along the sea front, peering into the faces of the young couples who promenaded, with my hand in my pocket ready, and a curious ache in my heart that had no kinship with rage. Until at last all the promenaders had gone home to bed, and I was alone with the star.

My train from Wyvern to Shapsham-bury that morning was a whole hour late; they said it was on account of the movement of troops to meet a possible raid from the Elbe.

## II

Shapsham-bury seemed an odd place to me even then. But something was quickening in me at that time to feel the oddness of many accepted things. Now is the retrospect, I see it as intensely queer. The whole place was strange to my untravelled eyes; the sea even was strange. Only twice in my life had I been at the seaside before, and then I had gone by excursion to places on the Welsh coast whose great cliffs of rock and mountain background made the effect of the horizon very different from what it is upon the East Anglian seaboard. Here, what they called a cliff, was a crumbling bank of whitey-brown earth not fifty feet high.

As soon as I arrived I made a systematic exploration of Shapsham-bury. To this day I retain the clearest memories of the plan I shaped out then, and how my inquiries

were incited by the overpowering desire of everyone to talk of the chances of a German raid, before the Channel fleet got round to us. I slept at a small public house in a Shapsham-bury back street on Sunday night. I did not get on to Shapsham-bury from Wyvern until two in the afternoon, because of the infrequency of Sunday trains, and I got no clue whatever until late in the afternoon of Monday.

As the little local train bumped into sight of the place round the curve of a swelling hill, one saw a series of undulating grassy spaces, amidst which a number of conspicuous notice boards appealed to the eye and cut up the distant sea horizon. Most of these referred to cornstills or to remedies to follow the cornstills; and they were colored with a view to be memorable rather than beautiful, to "stand out" amidst the gentle, grayish tones of the east coast scenery. The greater number, I may remark, of the advertisements that were so conspicuous a factor in the life of those days, and which rendered our vast tree-pulp newspapers possible, referred to food, drink, tobacco, and the drugs that promised a restoration of the equanimity those other articles had destroyed.

But, in addition to such boards, there were also the big black and white boards of various grandiosely named "enterprises." The individualistic enterprise of that time had led to the plotting out, of nearly all the country round the seaside towns, into roads and building-plots. All but a small portion of the south and east coast was in this condition; and, had the promises of these schemes been realized, the entire population of the island might have been accommodated upon the sea frontier. Nothing of the sort happened, of course. The whole of this agglutination of the coast line was done to stimulate a little, foolish gambling in plots. One saw everywhere agents' boards in every state of brokenness and decay, ill-made exploitation roads overgrown with grass, and here and there, at a corner, a label, "Treadgair Avenue," or "Sea View Road." Here and there, too, some small investor, some shopman with "savings," had delivered his soul to the local builders and built himself a house, and there it stood, ill designed, mean looking, isolated, ill placed on a cheaply leased plot, awkward which his domestic washing flattered in the brown

under a black dissolution of enterprise. Then, presently, our railway crossed a high-  
road, and a row of mean yellow brick  
houses—workmen's cottages, and the filthy,  
black sheds that made the "allotments"  
of that time a universal cynosure—marked  
our approach to the more central areas of  
—I quote the local guidebook—"one of the  
most delightful resorts in the East Anglian  
poppayland." Then more mean houses;  
the great ugliness of the electric power-  
station—it had a huge chimney, because  
no one understood how to make the com-  
bustion of coal complete—and then we  
were in the railway station, and barely  
three-quarters of a mile from the center of  
the heart of health and pleasure.

I inspected the town thoroughly before  
I made my inquiries. The road began  
badly, with a row of cheap, pretentious, in-  
solvent-looking shops, a public house, and  
a cab stand, but, after an interval of little  
red villas that were partly hidden amidst  
scrubby gardens, broke into a confusedly  
bright, but not unpleasant, High Street,  
shattered that afternoon and substantially  
still. Somewhere in the background a  
church bell jangled, and children in bright,  
new-looking clothes were going to Sunday  
school. Thence, through a square of  
stuccoed lodging-houses, that seemed a  
finer and cleaner version of my native  
square, I came to a garden of asphalt and  
eucalyptus—the sea front. I sat down on  
a cast-iron seat, and surveyed, first of all,  
the broad stretches of sandy, sandy  
beach, with its queer wheeled bathing-  
machines, painted with the advertisements  
of somebody's pills—and then at the house  
fronts that stared out upon these vicinal  
counseils. Boarding-houses, private ho-  
tels, and lodging-houses in terraces clustered  
closely right and left of me, and then came  
to an end. In one direction, scaffolding  
marked a building enterprise in progress, in  
the other, after a waste interval, rose a  
mammoth, baying red shape, a huge hotel,  
that dwarfed all other things. Northward,  
were low, pale cliffs with white denticulations  
of towers, where the local volunteers, all under  
arms, lay encamped, and southward, a  
spreading waste of sandy dunes, with occa-  
sional bushes and clumps of stunted pine  
and an advertisement board or so. A hard,  
blue sky hung over all this prospect, the  
sunshine castinky shadows, and outward  
was a whitish sea. It was Sunday, and

the midday meal still held people in-  
doors.

A queer world! thought I even then—  
to you now it must seem impossibly queer  
—and after an interval I forced myself  
back to my own affair.

How was I to ask? What was I to ask  
for?

My solution was fairly ingenious. I  
invented the following story: I happened  
to be taking a holiday in Shaphambury,  
and I was making use of the opportunity  
to seek the owner of a valuable feather box,  
which had been left behind in the hotel of  
my uncle at Wyvern by a young lady,  
traveling with a young gentleman—no  
doubt a youthful married couple. They  
had reached Shaphambury sometime on  
Thursday. I went over the story many  
times, and gave my imaginary uncle and  
his hotel plausible names. At any rate,  
this yarn would serve as a complete justifi-  
cation for all the questions I might wish  
to ask.

I attired that, but I still sat for a time,  
wanting the energy to begin. Then I  
turned toward the big hotel. Its gorgeous  
magnificence seemed to my inept judg-  
ment to indicate the very place a rich young  
man of good family would select.

Huge, draught-proof doors were swung  
round for me by an ironically polite under  
porter in a magnificent green uniform, who  
looked at my clothes as he listened to my  
question, and then, with a German ac-  
cent, referred me to a gorgeous head porter,  
who directed me to a princely young man  
behind a counter of brass and polish, like  
a bank—like several banks. The young  
man, while he answered me, kept his eye  
on my collar and tie, and I knew that they  
were abominable.

"I want to find a lady and gentleman  
who came to Shaphambury on Thursday,"  
I said.

"Friends of yours?" he asked, with a  
terrible fineness of irony.

I made out at last that here, at any rate,  
the young people had not been. They  
might have lunched here, but they had had  
no room. But I went out—door opened  
again for me obsequiously—in a strike of  
social discrimination, and did not attack any  
other establishment that afternoon.

My resolution had come to a sort of ebb.  
More people were promenading, and their  
Sunday smartness shocked me. I forgot

my purpose in an acute sense of myself. I felt that the bulge of my pocket caused by the revolver was conspicuous, and I was ashamed. I went along the sea front away from the town, and presently lay down among pebbles and sea poppies. The mood of reaction prevailed with me all that afternoon. In the evening, about sundown, I went to the station and asked questions of the importers there. But importers, I found, were a class of men who remembered luggage rather than people, and I had no sort of idea what luggage young Verrall and Nettie were likely to have with them.

Then I fell into conversation with a salacious, wooden-legged old man with a silver ring, who swept the steps that went down to the beach from the parade. He knew much about young couples, but only in general terms, and nothing of the particular young couple I sought. He reminded me, in the most disagreeable way, of the sensuous aspects of life, and I was not sorry when presently a gumbot appeared in the offing, signalling the coast guard and the coast, and cut short his observations upon holidays, beaches, and morals.

I went, and now I was past my shift, and sat in a seat upon the parade, and watched the brightening of those rising clouds of chilly fire that made the rusty west seem tame. My midday luncheon was gone, my blood was coming warmer again. And as the twilight and that fiery brightness replaced the dusky sunlight and robbed the unfamiliar place of all its matter-of-fact queeriness, and its sense of wisdom, materialism, romance returned to me, and passion, and my thoughts of honor and revenge. I remember that change of mood as occurring very vividly on this occasion, but I fancy that, less distinctly, I had felt this many times before. In the old times, night and the starlight had an effect of intimate reality the daytime did not possess.

I had a queer illusion that night, that Nettie and her lover were close at hand, that suddenly I should come on them. I have already told how I went through the dark seeking them in every couple that drew near. And I dropped asleep, at last, in an unfamiliar bedroom, hung with gaudily decorated nets, cursing myself for having wasted a day.

## III

I sought them in vain the next morning, but after midday, I came in quick succession on a perplexing multitude of chances. After failing to find any young couple that corresponded to young Verrall and Nettie, I presently discovered an unsatisfactory quartette of couples.

Any of these four couples might have been the one I sought; with regard to none of them was there conviction. They had all arrived on either Wednesday or Thursday. Two couples were still in occupation of their rooms, but neither of these were at home. Late in the afternoon, I reduced my list by eliminating a young man in drab, with side-whiskers and long cuffs, accompanied by a lady, of thirty or more, of consciously ladylike type. I was disgusted at the sight of them. The other two young people had gone for a long walk, and, though I watched their boarding-house until the fiery cloud came out above, sharing and mingling in an unusually splendid sunset, I missed them. Then I discovered them dining at a separate table in the bow window, with red-shaded candles between them, peering out ever and again at this splendor that was neither night nor day. The girl in her pink evening dress looked very light and pretty to me, pretty enough to enrage me; she had well-shaped arms and white, well-shouldered shoulders, and the turn of her cheek and the fair hair about her ears were full of subtle delights. But she was not Nettie, and the happy man with her was that odd, degenerate type our old aristocracy produced with such odd frequency—childish, large, bony nose, small, fair head, languid expression, and a neck that had demanded and received a veritable sheet of collar. I stood outside in the meteor's livid light, hating them and cursing them for having delayed me so long.

That finished Shaphambury. The question I now had to debate was, which of the remaining couples I had to pursue.

I walked back to the parade trying to reason my next step out, and mattering to myself, because there was something in that luminous wonderfulness that touched one's brain, and made one feel a little light-headed.

One couple had gone to London; the other had gone to the burglow village at

Bone CHB. Where, I wondered, was Bone CHB?

I came upon my wooden-legged man at the top of his steps.

"Hello!" said I.

He pointed seaward with his pipe; his silver ring shone in the skylight.

"Sure," he said.

"What is?" I asked.

"Searchlights! Smoke! Ships going north! If it wasn't for this Misted Milky Way gone green up there, we might see."

He was too intent to heed my questions for a time. Then he vouchsafed over his shoulder:

"Know bungalow village? — rather. Artists' and such. Nice going; cool. Mixed bedding—something scandalous. Yes."

"But where is it?" I said, suddenly exasperated.

"There?" he said. "What's that flicker? A gas flash—or I'm a lost soul!"

"You'd hear," I said, "long before it was near enough to see a flash."

He didn't answer. Only by making it clear I would distract him until he told me what I wanted to know, could I get him to turn from his absorbed contemplation of that phantom dance between the sea rim and the shore.

"Seven miles," he said, "along this road. And now go to 'ell with yer!"

I answered with some foul insult by way of thanks, and so we parted, and I set off toward the bungalow village.

I found a policeman, standing sky-gazing, a little way beyond the end of the parade. He verified the wooden-legged man's directions.

"It's a lousy road, you know," he called after me.

I had an odd intuition that now, at last, I was on the right track. I left the dark masses of Shapshbury behind me, and pushed out into the dim pallor of that night.

The incidents of that long tramp I do not recall in any orderly succession. The one progressive thing is my memory of a growing fatigue. The sea was, for the most part, smooth and shining like a mirror, a great expanse of reflecting silver, hued by slow, broad undulations; but, at one time, a little breeze breathed like a faint sigh and ruffled their long bodies into faint, wavy ripples that never completely died out again. The way was

sometimes sandy, thick with silvery, colorless sand, and sometimes chalky and lumpy, with lumps that had shining facets; a black scrub was scattered, sometimes in thickets, sometimes in single branches, among the somnolent hummocks of sand. At one place, came grass, and ghostly great sheep looming up among the grass. After a time, black pine woods intervened, and made sustained darkness along the road, woods that frayed out at the edges to windily warped and stunted trees. Then, isolated pine witches would appear, and make their rigid gestures at me as I passed. Grotesquely incongruous amidst these forms, I presently came an estate board, appealing, "Houses can be built to suit purchaser," to the silver, to the shadows, and to the glare.

Once I remember the persistent barking of a dog from somewhere inland of me, and several times I took out and examined my revolver very carefully. I must, of course, have been full of my intention when I did that; I must have been thinking of Nettie and revenge, but I cannot now recall those emotions at all. Only I see again, very distinctly, the greenish gleams that ran over lock and barrel as I turned the weapon in my hand.

Then there was the sky, the wonderful, luminous, starless, moonless sky, and the empty, blue depths of the edge of it, between the water and the sea. And once—strange phantoms!—I saw far out upon the shore, and very small and distant, three long, black warships, without masts, or sails, or smoke, or any lights, dark, deadly, furtive things, traveling very swiftly and keeping an equal distance. And when I looked again they were very small, and then the ships had withdrawn them up.

Then once, a flash and what I thought was a gun, until I looked up and saw a fading trail of greenish light still hanging in the sky. And after that, there was a shiver and whispering in the air, a stronger throbbing in one's arteries, a sense of refreshment, a renewal of purpose.

Somewhere upon my way the road forked, but I do not remember whether that was near Shapshbury or near the end of my walk. The hesitation between two named unmade roads alone remains clear in my mind.

At last I grew weary. I came to piled heaps of decaying seaweed and cast trucks

running this way and that, and then I had missed the road, and was straggling among sand hummocks quite close to the sea. I came out on the edge of the dimly gleaming sandy beach, and something phosphorescent drew me to the water's edge. I bent down and peered at the little luminous specks that floated in the ripples.

Presently, with a sigh, I stood erect and contemplated the lonely peace of that last wonderful night. The meteor had now trailed its shining robe across the whole space of the sky and was beginning to set; in the east, the blue was coming to its own again; the sea was an intense edge of blackness.

How beautiful it was! how still and beautiful! Peace! peace!—the peace that passeth understanding, ruled in Night descending!

My heart thrilled, and suddenly I was weeping.

I did not want to kill. I did not want to be the servant of my passions any more. A great desire had come to me to escape from life, from the daylight which is heat and conflict and *dash*, into that cool night of eternity—and run. I had played; I had done.

I stood upon the edge of the great ocean, and I was filled with an inarticulate spirit of prayer, and I desired greatly—peace from myself.

And presently, there in the east, would come again the red discolouring curtain over these mysteries, the fairer world again, the gray and growing harsh certainties of dawn. My *revolve*, I knew, would take up with me again. This was a rest for me, an interlude, but to-morrow I should be William Landford once more, ill nourished, ill dressed, ill equipped and clumsy, a thief and shamed, a wound upon the face of life, a source of trouble and sorrow even to the mother I loved; no hope in life left for me now but *revolve* before my death.

Why this palsy thing, *revolve*? It entered into my thoughts that I might end the matter now and let these others go.

To wade out into the sea, into this warm lapping that mangled the nature of water and light, to stand there breast-high, to thrust my *revolver* barrel into my mouth—?

Why not?

I swung about with an effort. I walked slowly up the beach thinking.

I turned and looked back at the sea. Not. Something within me said, "Not!"

I must think.

It was troublesome to go further because the hummocks and the tangled bushes began. I sat down amidst a black cluster of shrubs, and rested, chin on hand. I drew my *revolver* from my pocket and looked at it, and held it in my hand. Life? Or death?

I wanted to be peering the very depths of being, but, indeed, imperceptibly I fell asleep, and sat dreaming.

#### IV

Two people were bathing in the sea.

I had awakened. It was still that white and wonderful night, and the blue band of clear sky was no wider than before. These people must have come late night as I fell asleep, and awakened me almost at once. They waded breast-deep in the water, emerging, coming shoreward, a woman, with her hair coiled about her head, and in pursuit of her a man, graceful figure of black and silver, with a bright green surge flowing off from them, a patterning of flashing wavelets about them.

Each wore a tightly fitting bathing dress that hid nothing of the shivering, dripping beauty of their youthful forms.

She glanced over her shoulder and found him nearer than she thought, started, gesticulated, gave a little cry that pierced me to the heart, and fled up the beach obliquely toward me, running like the wind, and passed me, vanished amidst the black, distorted bushes, and was gone, she and her pursuer, in a moment, over the ridge of sand.

I heard him about between exhaustion and laughter.

And suddenly I was a thing of bestial fury, standing with hands held up and clenched, rigid in a gesture of impotent threatening, against the sky.

For this stinging, swift thing of light and beauty, was Nettle, and this was the man for whom I had been betrayed!

In another moment I was running and stumbling, *revolver* in hand, in quiet, unsuspected pursuit of them, through the soft and delicious sand.

(To be continued)



# In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

*Illustrated by Henri Lema*

## BOOK THE FIRST—THE COMET

### CHAPTER THE FIFTH—THE PURSUIT OF THE TWO LOVERS—(CONTINUED)

**SEVERAL:** The narrative, William Leadford, is telling of events in his youth before the Great Change. Through his friend Farland he has become a nominalist, and is now interested in a great comet whose path is approaching the earth's orbit. This fact is more important to him than the spread of socialism, for what will happen if the comet strikes the earth? Meanwhile, times are bad in England, owing to strikes, lockouts, overproduction, and the invasion of American products in the market. And, besides, war has just broken out between England and Germany. Leadford has been engaged to marry Maria Stuart, but she has broken with him on account of his beliefs. The young man still loves the girl and continues to visit her. On one of these visits he learns that she has eloped with Edward Yernall, the son of her father's employer. The couple have gone to a resort on the west coast. Leadford follows them, carrying a revolver he has bought. Arriving, he learns that they are probably to be found at a little summer colony known as the "bungalow village."

#### V



CAME up over the little ridge and discovered the bungalow village I had been seeking, resting in a crescent lap of dunes. A door slammed, the two runners had vanished. I halted, staring.

There was a group of three bungalows nearer to me than the others. Into one of these three they had gone, and I was too late to see which. All had doors and windows curiously open, and none showed a light.

This place, upon which I had at last happened, was a fruit of the reaction of artistic-minded and curiously living people, against the costly and uncomfortable social stiffness of the more formal seaside resorts of that time. It was, you must understand, the custom of the steam railway companies to sell their cars after they had been obsolete for a sufficient length of time, and some genius had hit upon the possibility of turning these into little, habitable cabins for the summer holiday. The thing had become a fashion with a certain bohemian-spirited class; they added cabin to cabin, and these little improved homes, gaily painted and with broad verandas and

supplementary lawns added to their accommodation, made the brightest contrast conceivable to the dull regularity of the seashore resorts. Of course, there were many discomforts in such camping that had to be faced cheerfully, and so this broad, sandy beach was sacred to high spirits and the young. Art, music and luncheon, Chinese lanterns and flying, are leading "notes," I find, in the impression of those who once knew such places well. I saw the thing as no gathering of light hearts and gay idleness, but gleefully, after the manner of poor men, polished by the suppression of all their cravings after joy. To the poor man, to the grimy worker, beauty and pleasure were absolutely denied; out of a life of gray dirt, of muddled dreams, they watched their happier fellows with a bitter envy and fond, tormenting suspicions. Fancy a world in which the common people held less to be a sort of beatitude, even sated to being drunk!

There was, in the old time, always something cruel at the bottom of this business of actual love. At least that is the impression I have brought with me across the gulf of the Great Change. To succeed in love seemed such triumph as no other means could give, but to fail was as if one was tainted.

I felt no sense of singularity that this flood of savagery should run through these emotions of mine, and become now the whole strand of these emotions. I believed, and I think I was right in believing, that the love of all true lovers was a sort of defiance then, that they chose a system in each other's arms and mocked the world without. You loved against the world; and these two loved at me. They had their business with each other, under the threat of a watched firestorm. A sword, a sharp sword, the keenest edge in life, lay among their ribs.

Whatever may be true of this for others, for me and my imagination, at any rate, it was altogether true. I was never for dalliance; I was never a jesting lover. I wanted fiercely, I made love impatiently. Perhaps I had written irrelevant love letters for that very reason; because with this mark there I could not play.

All the nearer banglows were very still now. If I walked softly to them, from open windows, from something seen or overheard, I might get a clue to guide me. Should I advance cautiously, creeping upon them, or should I walk straight to the door? It was bright enough for her to recognize me clearly at a distance of many paces.

"Down!" the sound crept upon my senses, and then again it came.

I turned impatiently, as one turns upon an imperfection, and beheld a great broad-chest not four miles out, steaming fast across the dappled silver, and from its funnel sparks, intensely red, poured out into the night. As I turned, came the hot flash of its guns, firing seaward, and answering this, red flashes and a steaming smoke in the line between sea and sky.

With a shuddering hiss, a rocket from a headland beyond the village leaped up and burst head-foremost against the glare, and the sound of the third and fourth guns reached me.

The windows of the dark banglows, one after another, leaped out, squares of ruddy brightness that flared and flickered and became steadily bright. Dark heads appeared, looking seaward, a door opened and sent out a bold lance of yellow to mingle and be lost in the comet's brightness. That brought me back to the business in hand.

I became aware of the voices of people

calling to one another in the village. A white-robed, hooded figure, some man in a bathing wrap, absurdly suggestive of an Arab in his burrows, came out from one of the nearer banglows, and stood clear and still and shadowless in the glare.

He put his hands to shade his seaward eyes, and shouted to people within.

First one, and then two, other wrapped figures came out of the banglows to join the first. His arm pointed seaward, and his voice, a full tenor, rose in explanation. I could hear some of the words. "It's a German!" he said. "She's caught."

Some one departed then, and there followed a wide indistinct bubble of argument. I went on slowly in the circle I had marked out, watching these people as I went.

They shouted together with such a common intensity of direction that I halted and looked seaward. I saw the tall fountain flung by a shot that had just missed the great warship. A second rose still nearer us, a third, and a fourth, and then, a great spread of dust, a whirling cloud, leaped out of the headland whence the rocket had come, and spread, with a slow deliberation, right and left. Hard on that an enormous crash, and the man with the full voice leaped and cried, "Hill!"

Let me see! Of course, I had to go round beyond the banglows, and then come up toward the group from behind.

A high-pitched, woman's voice called "Honey-mooner! honey-mooner! Come out and see!"

Something glimmered in the shadow of the nearer banglow, and a man's voice answered from within. What he said, I did not catch, but suddenly I heard Nettie calling very distinctly, "We've been bathing."

The man who had first come out shouted: "Don't you hear the guns? They're lighting—not five miles from shore."

"Oh?" answered from the banglow, and a window opened.

"Out there!"

I did not hear the reply, because of the faint rattle of my own movements. Clearly, these people were all too much occupied by the battle to look in my direction, and so I walked now straight toward the darkness that held Nettie and the black desire of my heart.



THEY ARE POINTED SEAWARD, AND I COULD HEAR SOME OF THE WORDS. "IT'S A GER-  
MAN!" HE SAID, "SHIP'S CAPTAIN!"

"Look!" cried some one, and pointed skyward.

I glanced up, and behold! the sky was streaked with bright green tracks. They radiated from a point halfway between the western horizon and the zenith; and within the shining clouds of the meteor, a streaming movement had begun, so that it seemed to be pouring both westwardly and back toward the east, with a crackling sound, as though the whole heaven was ripped over with phantom pistol shots. It seemed to me then, as if the meteor was coming to help me, descending with those thousand pistol-like a curtains to fire off this unbecoming foolishness of the sea.

To glance up at that streaky, stirring, light scene of the sky made one's head swim. I stood for a moment dazed, and more than a little giddy. I had a curious instant of purely speculative thought. Suppose, after all, the lunatics were right, and the world was coming to an end! What a score that would be for Farlow!

Then it came into my head that all these things were happening to consecrate my revenge! The war below, the heavens above, were the thunderous prelude of my deed. I heard Nettie's voice cry out not fifty yards away, and my passion surged again. I was to return to her until those arrows, bearing unanticipated death.

It was fifty yards, forty yards, thirty yards—the little group of people, still heedless of me, was larger and more important now, the green-shot sky, and the fighting ships were remote. Some one darted out from the hangover, with an interrupted question, and stopped, suddenly aware of me. It was Nettie, with some coquettish, dark wrap about her, and the green glare shining on her sweet face and white throat. I could see her expression, arched with dismay and terror at my advance, as though something had seized her by the heart and held her still—a target for my shots.

"Forward!" came the bronzed's gunshot like a command. "Bang!" the bullet leaped from my hand. Do you know, I did not want to shoot her then. Indeed, I did not want to shoot her *now*! "Bang!" and I had fired again, still urdine on, and—each time it seemed I had missed.

She moved a step or so toward me, still staring, and then some one intervened, and now beside her I saw young Verrall.

A heavy stranger, the man in the hooded bath gown, a fat, totem-looking man, came out of nowhere like a shield before them. He seemed a preposterous interloper. His face was full of astonishment and terror. He rushed across my path with arms extended and open hands, as one might try to stop a runaway horse.

By an enormous effort I resisted a mechanical impulse to shoot through his fat body. Anyhow, I knew I wasn't about him. For a moment I was in doubt. Then I became very active, turned aside sharply and dodged his pawing arm to the left, and so found two others immediately in my way. I fired a third shot in the air, just over their heads, and ran at them. They hastened left and right. I pulled up and faced about within a yard of a boy-faced young man cowering sideways, who seemed about to grapple me. At my moment's halt, he fell back a pace, ducked, and threw up a defensive arm, and then I perceived the course was clear, and ahead of me, young Verrall and Nettie—he was holding her arm to help her—running away.

I fired a fourth intellectual shot, and then, in an access of fury at my misses, started out to run them down and shoot them hard to backbone.

Some one pursued me, perhaps several persons—I do not know. We left them all behind.

We ran. For a space I was altogether intent upon the swift monotony of flight and pursuit. The sands were changed to a whirl of green moonshine, the air was thunder. A luminous green haze rolled about us. What did such things matter? We ran. Did I gain or lose? That was the question. They ran through a gap in a broken fence that sprang up abruptly out of nothingness, and turned to the right. I noted we were in a road. But this green mist! One seemed to glow through it. They were fading now, and at that thought I made a sprint that was a dozen feet or more.

She staggered. He gripped her arm, and dragged her forward. They doubled to the left. We were off the road again and on turf—it felt like turf. I tripped and fell at a ditch that was somehow full of smoke, and was up again, but now they were phantoms half gone into the vivid mist about me.



WITHIN THE RAPID CLASH OF THE METEOR, A STREAMING MONUMENT HAD BEEN



I FIRED MY REVOLVER AT A WRESTLER AND FELL HEADLONG TO THE GROUND

still I rise.

Oh, no! I groaned with the violence of my effort. I staggered again and swore. I felt the convulsions of great pain tear past me through the work.

They were gone! Everything was going, but I kept on running. Once more I staggered. There was something about my feet that impeded me, tall grass or heather, but I could not see what it was, only this smoke that eddied about my

knees. There was a noise and spinning in my brain, a vain resistance to a dark, green curtain that was falling, falling, falling, fold upon fold. Everything grew darker and darker.

I made one last frantic effort, raised my revolver, fired my paralytic shot at a venture, and fell headlong to the ground. And behold! the green curtain was a black one, and the earth and I and all things ceased to be.

## BOOK THE SECOND—THE GREEN VAPORS

### CHAPTER THE FIRST—THE PRAYER

#### I



SEEMED to awaken out of a refreshing sleep.

I did not awaken with a start, but opened my eyes, and lay very comfortably, looking at a line of extraordinarily scarlet poppies that glowed against a glowing sky. It was the sky of a magnificent sunrise, and an archipelago of gold-bearded, purple islands floated in a sea of golden green. The poppies too, sun-mottled heads, blinding scarlet, translucent, stout and veined, stoutly upheld, had a lustrous quality, seemed wrought only from some more solid kind of light.

I stared unwonderingly at these things for a time, and then there rose upon my consciousness, intermingling with them, the bristling golden-green heads of growing barley.

A remote faint question, where I might be, drifted and vanished again in my mind. Everything was very still.

Everything was as still as death.

I felt very light, full of the sense of physical well-being. I perceived I was lying on my side in a little rounded space in a weedy, flowering barley field, that was, in some inexpressible way, saturated with light and beauty. I sat up, and remained for a long time filled with the delight and charm of the delicate little convolvulus that twisted among the barley stems, the pimpernel that faced the ground below.

Then that question returned. What

was this place? How had I come to be sleeping here?

I could not remember.

It perplexed me that, somehow, my body felt strange. It was unfamiliar—I could not tell how—and the barley, and the beautiful woods, and the slowly developing glory of the dawn behind, all these things partook of the same unfamiliarity. I felt as though I was a thing in some very luminous, painted window, as though the dawn broke through me. I felt I was part of some exquisite picture painted in light and joy.

A faint breeze bent and rustled the barley heads, and jugged my mind forward.

Who was I? That was a good way of beginning.

I held up my left hand and arm before me, a grubby hand, a frayed cuff, but with a quality of painted unrealism, transfigured, as a beggar might have been by Botticelli. I looked for a time steadily at a beautiful pearl above all.

I remembered Willie Lundford, who had owned that arm and hand, as though he had been some one else.

Of course! My history—to rough outline, rather than the immediate post—began to shape itself in art memory, very small, very bright and inarticulate. Like a thing watched through a microscope. Clayton and Swathingslow treated to mind; the slams and darknesses, Djerre-qua, menses, and in their rich, dark colors pleasing, and through them I went toward my destiny. I sat, hands on knees, recalling that queer, passionate career that had ended with my bullet shot into the growing

darkness of the End. The thought of that shot awake my emotions again.

There was something in it now, something ahead, that made me smile pitifully.

Poor little, angry, miserable creature! Poor little, angry, miserable world!

I sighed for pity, not only pity for myself, but for all the lost beauty, the corrupted truths, the simpering, striding things of hope and pain that had found their peace at last beneath the peering mat and collection of the comet. Because certainly that world was over and done. They were all so weak and unhappy, and I was new so strong and so serene. For I felt sure I was dead: no one living could have this perfect assurance of good, this strong and confident peace. I had made an end of the fever called living. I was dead, and it was all right, and these—

I felt an inconsistency.

These, then, must be the barley fields of God—the still and silent barley fields of God, full of unfolding poppy flowers whose seeds bear peace.

## II

It was queer to find barley fields in heaven, but no doubt there were many surprises in store for me.

How still everything was! Peace! The peace that passeth understanding. After all it had come to me! But, indeed, everything was very still. Surely I was alone in the world! No birds sang. Yes, and all the distant sounds of life had ceased, the lowing of cattle, the barking of dogs.

Something that was like fear baffled, came into my heart. It was all right, I knew; but to be alone! I stood up and met the hot summons of the rising sun, hurrying toward me, as it were, with glad tidings, over the spires of the barley.

Blinded, I made a step. My foot struck something hard, and I looked down to discover my neighbor, a blue-black thing, like a dead snake at my feet.

For a moment that gazed me.

Then I clung forgot about it. The wonder of the quiet took possession of my soul. Down, and no birds singing!

How beautiful was the world! How beautiful, but how still! I walked slowly through the barley toward a line of elder bushes, gnarled trees and bramble that made the hedge of the field. I noted as

I passed along a shrew mouse dead, as it seemed to me, among the blades; then a still toad. I was surprised that this did not leap aside from my footfalls, and I stooped and picked it up. Its body was limp like life, but it made no struggle, the brightness of its eye was veiled; it did not move in my hand.

It seems to me now that I stood holding that lifeless little creature for some time. Then very softly I stooped down and released it. I was trembling—trembling with a nameless emotion. I looked with quickened eyes closely among the barley stems, and behold, now everywhere I saw beetles, flies, and little creatures that did not move, lying as they fell when the vapors overcame them; they seemed no more than painted things. Some were novel creatures to me. I was very unfamiliar with natural things. "My God!" I cried; "but is it only I?"

And then, at my next movement, something squeaked sharply. I turned about, but I could not see it, only I saw a little hole in a rut and heard the diminishing rattle of the unseen creature's flight. And at that, I turned to my head again, and its eye moved and it stirred. And presently, with inkling and hesitating gestures, it stretched its limbs and began to crawl away from me.

But wonder, that gentle stir of fear, had me now. I saw, a little way ahead, a brown and crimson butterfly perched upon a cornflower. I thought at first it was the breeze that stirred it, and then I saw its wings were quivering. And even as I watched it, it started into life, and spread itself, and fluttered into the air.

I watched it fly, a turn this way, a turn that, until suddenly it seemed to vanish. And now, life was returning to this thing and that on every side of me, with slow stretchings and broodings, with twitterings, with a little start and stir.

I came slowly, stepping very carefully because of these dragged, limply awakening things, through the barley to the hedge. It was a very glorious hedge, so that it held my eyes. It flowed along and interlarded like splendid music. It was rich with haws, honeysuckle, raspberries, and ragged roses, hickories, haws, and wild cherries turned and hung among its branches, and all along its ditch border the stony stitches were like its childish feet, and chorused





I TOOK UP AND MET THE HOT RADIATION OF THE RISING SUN, BURSTING TOWARD ME,  
AS IT WERE, WITH GLAD TIDINGS, OVER THE SPIRES OF EARLEY

in lines and masses. Never had I seen such a symphony of rose-like flowers and terrafra and heaven. And suddenly in its depths, I heard a chirrup and the whirr of startled wings.

Nothing was dead, but everything had changed to beauty! And I stood for a time with dazed and happy eyes looking at the intricate delicacy before me and marveling how richly God has made his world.

It might be the old world indeed, but something new lay upon all things, a glowing atmosphere of health and happiness. It might be the old world, but the dust and fury of the old life was certainly done. At least I had no doubt of that.

I recalled the last phases of my former life, that dizzying climax of pursuit and anger, the universal darkness, and the whirling green vapors of extinction. The sunset had struck the earth and made us

and to all things. Of that too I was assured.

But afterwards?

And now?

The imaginations of my boyhood came back as speculative possibilities. In those days I had believed firmly in the necessary advent of a last day, a great coming out of the sky, trumpeting and less, the Resurrection, and the Judgment. My roving fancy now suggested to me that this Judgment must have come and passed, that it had passed and in some manner missed me. I was left alone here, in a script and garish world to begin again perhaps.

I laughed loudly and long. And behold! even as I laughed, the keen point of things accomplished stilled my mirth, and I was weeping, weeping aloud, convulsed with weeping, and the tears were pouring down my face.

(To be continued.)

## The First Furrow

BY JAMES A. MONTAGNE

*Illustrated by John Edwin Jackson*

Don't you ever feel a yearnin', 'long about this time o' year,  
For a robin's song to tell you that the summer time is near?  
Don't you ever sort o' hanker for the blackbird's whistlin' call,  
Echoin' through the hillside orchard, where the blossoms used to fall?  
Don't you wish that you were out there, loathin' in the April air,  
Full o' glad an' careless boyhood, an' with strength an' health to spare?  
Don't it *seem* you to remember, when the springtime comes around,  
How the first, long, rollin' furrow used to wake the sleepy ground?

How'd you like to take the children, born to dirty city streets,  
Out to where the brook goes pulkin' when the heart o' nature beats?  
How'd you like to watch 'em wonder at the hummin' of the bees,  
Or to see 'em dodge the petals that are snowin' from the trees?  
How'd you like to see their faces catch the color o' the rose,  
As they meed across the meadow where the earliest crocus grows?  
Wouldn't it be joy to watch 'em follow on behind the plow,  
As it cut the first brown furrow, like it's doin' out there now?



# In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

*Illustrated by Elmer Jewett*

## BOOK THE SECOND—THE GREEN VAPORS

### CHAPTER THE FIRST—THE CHANGE—(CONTINUED)

SIX MONTHS: The previous bookments deal with happenings in England just before the Great Change, when a huge comet is threatening to come in contact with the earth. In addition to local times and general discontent with existing social conditions, England has gone to war with Germany. The narrative, William Leinster, has become a wanderer through the influence of his loved Pauline. This means leads to the breaking of Leinster's engagement to Nettie Stuart. The young man still loves the girl, and when she elopes with Edward Verrill, the son of her father's employer, he follows the couple to a resort on the East coast. Here he attempts to kill the lovers with his revolver, but the shots go wild, and just when the earth, rushing into the comet's path, is engulfed in a gas which renders every living being unconscious. This state lasts a few hours, and then the whole world re-awakens. An amazing effect of the gas on the human race is now evident.

### III

EVERYWHERE the awakening came with the sunrise. We awakened to the glad news of the morning; we walked dazed in a light that was joy. Everywhere that was so. It was always morning. It was morning because, until the first rays of the sun touched it, the changing nitrogen of our atmosphere did not pass into its permanent phase; and

the sleepers lay as they had fallen. In an intermediate state, the air being inert, incapable of producing either revival or stuporization, no longer green, but not yet changed to the gas that now lives in us.

To everyone, I think, came some parallel to the mental state; I have already sought to describe—a wonder, an impression of joyful novelty. There was also, very commonly, a certain confusion of the intelligence, a difficulty in self-recognition. I remember clearly, as I sat on my side, that previously I had the clearest doubts of my own identity and fell into the wildest

metaphysical questionings. "If this be I," I said, "then how is it I am no longer sadly seeking Nettie? Nettie is now the remotest thing—and all my wrongs. Why have I suddenly passed out of all that passion? Why does not the thought of Vernell quicken my pulses?"

I was only one of many millions who, that morning, had the same doubt. I suppose one knows oneself for oneself, when one emerges from sleep or insensibility, by the familiarity of one's bodily sensations, and that morning all our most intimate bodily sensations were changed. The intricate chemical processes of life were changed and its nervous metaphors. For the fluctuating, uncertain, passion-darkened thought and feeling of the old time came steady, full-bodied, wholesome processes. Touch was different, sight was clearer, sound and all the senses were subtler. Had it not been that our thought was steadier and fuller, I believe great multitudes of men would have gone mad. But, as it was, we understood. The dominant impression I would convey in this account of the Change is one of enormous release, of a vast, unobstructed exultation. There was an effect, as it were, of light-headedness that was also clear-headedness and the attention is one's bodily sensations, instead of producing the mental obfuscation, the loss of identity that was a common mental trouble under former conditions, gave simply a new detachment from the usual passions and entanglements of the personal life.

In this story of my better, restricted youth that I have been telling you, I have sought constantly to convey the narrowness, the intensity, the confusion, middle, and dusty heat of the old world. It was quite clear to me, within an hour of my awakening, that all that was, in some mysterious way, over and done. That, too, was the common experience. Men stood up; they took the new air into their lungs—a deep, long breath, and the past fell from them, they could forgive, they could disregard, they could attempt.

And it was no new thing, no miracle that set aside the former order of the world: it was a change in material conditions, a change in the atmosphere, that at once bound had released them. Some of them it had released to death. Indeed, man himself had changed not at all. We knew before

the Change, the moment knew, by glowing moments in ourselves and others, by luminous and music and beautiful things, by heroic instances and splendid stories, how fine mankind could be, how fine almost any human being could upon occasion be, but the poison in the air, its poverty in all the nobler elements which made such moments rare and remarkable—all that had changed. The air was changed, and the Spirit of Man that had dreamed and slumbered and dreamed dull and evil things, awakened, and stood with wonder-clear eyes, refreshed, looking again on life.

#### IV

The miracle of the awakening came to me in solitude, the laughter, and then the tears. Only after some time did I come upon another man. Until I heard his voice calling, I did not seem to feel there were any other people in the world. All that seemed past, with all the stresses that were past. I had come out of the individual pit in which my sympathy had lurked, I had overflowed to all humanity, I had seemed to be all humanity, I had laughed at others as I could have laughed at myself, and this about that came to me seemed like the coming of an unexpected thought in my own mind. But when it was repeated I answered "I am lost," said the voice, and I descended into the lane forthwith, and so came upon Melmore, sitting near the ditch with his back to me.

Some of the incidental sensory impressions of that morning bit so deeply into my mind that I verily believe, when, at last, I face the greater mysteries that lie beyond this life, when the things of this life fade from me as the mists of the morning fade before the sun, those irrelevant, petty details will be the last to leave me, will be the last wings visible of that attenuating veil. I believe, for instance, I could match the fur upon the collar of his great moose-horn coat now, could point the dull-red tinge of his bag check with his fair eyelashes just catching the light and showing beyond. His hat was old, his dome-shaped head, with its smooth hair between red and extreme fairness, was bent forward in scrutiny of his twisted foot. His back seemed enormous. And there was something about



THE AWAKENING CAME WITH THE DECADE

the more massive sight of him that filled me with liking.

"What's wrong?" said I.

"I say," he said, in his full deliberate tones, starting round to see me and showing a profile, a well-modeled nose, a sensitive, clumsy, big lip, known to every corner in the world. "I'm in a fix. I fell and scratched my ankle. Where are you?"

I walked round him and stood looking at his face. I perceived he had his gutters and socks and boots off, the motor gentleman had been out aside, and he was knocking the injured part in an explanatory manner with his thick thumbs.

"Be jove!" I said, "you're Melmound!"

"Melmound!" He thought. "That's my name," he said, without looking up. "But it doesn't affect my ankle."

We remained silent for a few moments except for a grunt of pain from him.

"Do you know?" I asked, "what has happened to things?"

He seemed to complete his diagnosis. "It's not broken," he said.

"Do you know," I repeated, "what has happened to everything?"

"No," he said, looking up at me in curiously for the first time.

"There's some difference——"

"There's a difference!" He smiled, a smile of unexpected pleasantry, and an interest was coming into his eyes. "I've been a little preoccupied with my own internal sensations. I remark an extraordinary brightness about things. Is that it?"

"That's part of it. And a queer feeling, a clear-headedness——"

He surveyed me and meditated gravely. "I wake up," he said, feeling his way in his memory.

"And I——"

"I lost my way—I forget quite how! There was a curious green fog." He started at his loss, remembering. "Something to do with a comet. I was by a hedge in the darkness. Tried to run. Then I must have pitched into this lane. Look!" He pointed with his hand. "There's a wooden mill near-brokers there. I must have stumbled over that out of the field above." He scrutinized this and concluded, "Yes."

"It was dark," I said, "and a sort of green gas came out of nothing everywhere. That is the last I remember."

"And then you wake up?" So did I—

in a state of great bewilderment. Certainly there's something odd in the air. I was—I was running along a road in a motor car, very much excited and preoccupied. I got down——" He held out a triumphant finger. "Incidentally!"

"Now I've got it! We'd strung our feet from here to Trondheim. We'd got right across them, and the Elbe meant! We'd lost the *Lord Warden*. By jove, you! The *Lord Warden*? A battleship that cost two million pounds—and that foot Egly said it didn't matter! Eleven hundred men were down. I remember now. We were sweeping up the North Sea like a net, with the North Atlantic fleet waiting at the Farnes for us—and not one of 'em had three days' coal! Now, was that a dream? No! I told a lot of people at lunch—a meeting was it?—to reassure them. They were warlike but extremely frightened. Quaver people—genuinely and bald like geese, most of them. Where? Of course! We had it all over—a big dinner—system—Colchester. I'd been there, just to show all this mild scene was constructive. And I was coming back here. But it doesn't seem as though that was—never. I suppose it was. Yes, of course, it was. I got out of my car at the bottom of the rise with the idea of walking along the cliff path, because everyone told me of their battleships was being chased along the shore. That's clear! I heard their guns——"

He reflected. "Quar! I should have forgotten! Did you hear any gun?"

I said I had heard them.

"Was it last night?"

"Last last night. One or two in the morning."

He leaned back on his hand and looked at me, smiling drunkenly. "Even now," he said, "it's odd, but the whole of that seems like a silly dream. Do you think there was a *Lord Warden*? Do you really believe we sunk all that machinery—for fun? It was a dream. And yet—it happened!"

By all the standards of the former time it would have been remarkable that I talked quite calmly and freely with so great a man. "Yes," I said, "that's it. One feels one has awakened from something more than that green gas. As though the other things also weren't quite real."

He lifted his brows and left the coil of his leg thoughtfully. "I made a speech at Colchester," he said.

I thought he was going to add something more about that, but three fingered a habit of reticence in the man that held him for the moment. "It is a very curious thing," he broke away, "that this pain should be, on the whole, more interesting than disagreeable."

"You are in pain?"

"My ankle, sir! It's either broken or badly sprained—I think sprained; it's very painful to move, but personally I'm not in pain. That sort of general sickness that comes with local injury—not a trace of it!" He moved and remarked: "I was speaking of Colchester, and saying things about the war. I begin to see it better. The reporter—scribble, scribble. Max Stutson, scribbles. Hitherto. Compliments about the system. Min—min. What was it? About the war? A war that must needs be long and bloody, taking toll from castle and cottage, taking toll! Rhetorical gusto! Was I drunk last night?"

His eyebrows puckered. He had drawn up his right knee, his elbow rested thereon and his chin on his fist. The deep-set gray eyes beneath his clutch of eyebrow stared at unknown things. "My God!" he murmured; "My God!" with a note of disgust. He made a big, brooding figure in the sunlight, he had an effect of more than physical largeness; he made me feel that it became me to wait upon his thinking. I had never met a man of this sort before, I did not know such man existed.

It is a curious thing that I cannot now recall any idea whatever that I had before the Change about the personalities of statesmen, but I doubt if ever in those days I thought of them at all as tangible, individual human beings, conceivably of some intellectual complexity. I believe that my impression was a straightforward blend of caricature and newspaper legend. I certainly had no respect for them. And now without servility or any insincerity whatever, as if it were a fact (fact of the Change, I found myself in the presence of a human being toward whom I perceived myself inferior and subordinate, before whom I stood without servility or any insincerity whatever, in an attitude of respect and attention. My inhuman, my machinelike opinion—or was it, after all, only the chance of life?—had never once permitted that before the Change.

He emerged from his thoughts, off with

a faint perplexity in his manner. "That speech I made last night," he said, "was damned, mischievous nonsense, you know. Nothing can alter that. Nothing. No! Little, but power in evening dress—goldfishing system. Ohai!"

It was a most natural part of the wonder of that morning, that he should adopt this incredible note of frankness, and that it should abate nothing from my respect for him.

"Yes," he said, "you are right. It's all indisputable fact, and I can't believe it was anything but a dream."

## V

That memory stands out against the dark past of the world with extraordinary clearness and brightness. The air, I remember, was full of the calling and piping and singing of birds. I have a curious persuasion, too, that there was a distant, happy clamor of pealing bells, but that, I am half-sure, is a mistake. Nevertheless, there was something in the fresh bits of things, in the dewy newness of sensation that set bells rejoicing in one's head. And that lag, fair, peaceful man sitting on the ground had beauty even in his clumsy pose, as though indeed some Great Master of strength and humor had made him.

And—it is so hard now to convey these things—he spoke to me, a stranger, without reservations, carelessly, as men now speak to men. Before those days, not only did we think badly, but what we thought, a thousand short-sighted considerations, dignity, objective discipline, discretion, a hundred hundred aspects of shakiness of soul, made us muffle before we told it to our fellowmen.

"It's all returning now," he said, and told me half colloquially what was in his mind.

I wish I could give every word he said to me, he struck out image after image to my nascent intelligence, with swift, broken fragments of speech. If I had a power, full memory of that morning I should give you, verbatim, minutely. But here, save for the little sharp things that stand out, I find only blurred general impressions. Throughout, I have to make up again his half-forgotten sentences and speeches, and be content

with giving you the general effect. But I can see and hear him now as he said: "The dream got worst at the end. The war—a perfectly horrible business! Horrible! And it was just like a nightmare, you couldn't do anything to escape from it—everyone was doomed!"

His sense of direction was gone.

He opened the war out to me—as every one sees it now. Only, that morning it was unending. He sat there on the ground, absently forgetful of his bare and swollen feet, treating me as the humblest accessories and as altogether an equal, talking out to himself the great obsessions of his mind. "We could have prevented it! Any of us who chose to speak out could have prevented it. A little decent frankness. What was there to prevent our being frank with one another? Their emperor—his position was a pile of ridiculous assumptions, no doubt, but at bottom he was a sane man." He touched off the emperor as a few pithy words, the German press, the German people, and our own. He put it so we should put it all now, but with a certain heat as of a man half guilty and wholly resentful. "They demanded little buttoned-up professions!" he cried, accidentally. "Were there ever such men? And ours! Some of us might have taken a firmer line. If a lot of us had taken a firmer line and squashed that nonsense early."

He layed out into inaudible whisperings, into silence.

I stood regarding him, understanding him, learning marvelously from him. It is a fact that for the best part of the morning of the Change I forgot Nettie and Verrill as completely as though they were no more than distractions in some novel that I had put aside to finish at my leisure, in order that I might talk to this man.

"Es, well," he said, waking startlingly from his thoughts; "here we are awoken! The thing can't go on now, all the more now. How it ever began—I! My dear boy, how did all those things ever happen? I feel like a new Adam. Do you think this has happened—generally? Or shall we had off these gowns and things? Who cares?"

He made as if to rise, and remembered his ankle. He suggested I should help him as far as his bangles. There seemed nothing strange to either of us that he should register our services or that I should

cheerfully obey. I helped him bangle his ankle, and we got out, I his crutch, the two of us making up a sort of limping quadruped, along the winding lane toward the cliffs and the sea.

## VI

His bangles beyond the gulf links was, perhaps, a wife and a quarter from the lane. We went down to the beach through and along the pallid, wave-smoothed sands, and we got along by making a snoring, hugging, or pad dance forward until I began to give under him, and then, as soon as we could, by sitting down. His ankle was, in fact, broken, and he could not put it to the ground without exquisite pain. So that it took us nearly two hours to get to the house, and it would have taken longer if his butler-valet had not come out to assist me. They had found motor car and chauffeur smashed and soil at the bend of the road near the house, and had been on that side looking for Helmsheim, or they would have seen us before.

For most of that time we were sitting now on, but, now on a chalk border, now on a flaking grass, and talking one to the other, with the frankness proper to the intercourse of men of good intent, without reservations or aggressions, in the common, open fashion of contemporary intercourse to-day, but which then, nevertheless, was the rarest and strongest thing in the world. He, for the most part, talked, but at some shape of a question I told him—as plainly as I could tell of passions that had, for a time, become incomprehensible to me—of my murderous pursuit of Nettie and her lover, and how the green vapors overcame me. He watched me with great open and modified understanding, and afterward he asked me hard, penetrating questions about my education, my upbringing, my work. There was a deliberation in his manner, head, full pauses, that had in them no element of delay.

"Yes," he said, "yes—of course. What a fool I have been!" and said no more until we had made another of our tripod struggles along the beach. At first, I did not see the connection of my story with that self accusation.

"Suppose," he said, pausing on the grass, "there had been such a thing as a 'strutman'?"





EVERYWHERE ON EARTH THAT DAY IN THE HALLS OF EXTINCTION WHO BREATHED,  
THERE HAD BEEN THE SAME BURNING IN THE AIR, THE DARK RAIN OF GREEN  
VAPORS, THE CRUSTACEAN, THE STREAMING DOWN OF SHOOTING STARS

He turned to me. "If one had decided all this models should end! If one had taken it, as an artist takes his clay, as a man who builds takes site and stone, and made"—he flung out his big, broad hand at the glories of sky and sea, and drew a deep breath—"something to fit that setting!"

He added in explanation, "Then there wouldn't have been such statues as you are at all, you know."

"Tell me more about it," he said, "tell me all about yourself. I feel all these things have passed away, all these things are to be changed forever. You won't be what you have been from this time forth. All the things you have done—don't matter now. To us, at any rate, they don't matter at all. We have met, who were separated in that darkness below us. Tell me."

"Yes," he said, and I told my story straight and as frankly as I have told it to you. "And there, where those little skerries of weed rock run out to the edge, beyond the headland, a bungalow village. What did you do with your poet?"

"I left it lying there—among the barley."

He glanced at me from under his light eyebrows. "If others had like you and I," he said, "there'd be a lot of poems left among the barley to-day."

So we talked, I and that great strong man, with the love of brothers so plain between us it needed not a word. Our souls went out to each other in stark good faith, never before had I had anything but a guarded watchfulness for any fellow-man. Still I met him, upon that wild, desolate beach of the old tide—I see him leaving against the shelly buttresses of a groin, looking down at the poor, drowned sailor whose body we presently found. For we found a newly drowned man who had chanced just to meet this great dawn in which we rejoiced. We found him lying in a pool of water, among brown weeds in the dark shadow of the timbers. You must not overrate the honors of the former days; in those days it was actually more common to see death in England than it would be to-day. This dead man was a sailor from the *Aether Aler*, the great German battleship that—had we but known it—lay not four miles away along the coast, amidst piled-up mountains of chalk, oars, a torn and battered mass of machinery, wholly submerged at high water, and half-

ing in its interlions nine hundred drowned brave men, all strong and stalwart, all open capable of doing fine things.

I remember that poor boy very vividly. He had been drowned during the anæsthesia of the green gas. His fair young face was quiet and calm, but the skin of his chest had been crinkled by swelling water and his right arm was bent queerly back. Even to this needless death and all its tale of cruelty, beauty and dignity had come. "Everything flowed together to significance as we stood there, I, the ill-clad, cheaply equipped proletarian, and Malmgren in his great fur-trimmed coat—he was hot with walking but he had not thought to remove it—bearing upon the clumsy groans and pitying this poor victim of the war he had helped to make. "Poor lad!" he said, "poor lad! A child we him deserve sent to death! Do look at the quiet beauty of that face, that body—so he flung aside like this!"

(I remember that near this dead man's head a stranded scarlet writhed its slowly feeling limbs, struggling back toward the sea. It left grooved tracks in the sand.)

"There must be no more of this," pointed Malmgren, leaning on my shoulder, "no more of this."

But most, I recall Malmgren as he talked a little later, sitting upon a great chalk boulder with the sunlight on his big, perspiration-drenched face. He made his resolve. "We must end war," he said, in that full whisper of his; "it is stupidity. With so many people able to read and think—even as it is—there is no need of anything of the sort. Gods! What have we taken here at? Drowning like people in a stifling room, too dull and sleepy and too hot toward one another for argument to get up and open the windows. What haven't we been at?"

A great powerful figure he sits there still in my memory, prepared and astonished at himself and all things. "We must change all this," he repeated, and threw out his broad hands in a powerful gesture against the sea and sky. "We have done so weakly—heaven above us—why?" I can see him now, queer giant that he looked on that drearful beach of splendor, the sea birds flying about us and that crumpled death hard by, no had symbol in his clamorous and needless hunt of the untrickered powers of the former time. I



ON THE HIGH SEAS THE CROWDING BLENDING PASSENGERS WERE OVERCOME, THE  
WAVES THROBBER UPON THEIR WAY UNTERED



THE NOODLEMAN HAD LIT STICKS AND FLAMES LITNESS WITH CROWDED PEOPLE

remember it as an integral part of that picture that, far away across the sandy stretches, one of those white oxide boards I have described stuck up a little askew amidst the yellow-green turf upon the crest of the low dune.

He talked with a sort of wonder of the former things. "Has it ever dawned upon you to imagine the pettiness—the pettiness!—of every soul concerned in a declaration of war?" he asked. He went on, as though speech was necessary to make it credible, to describe Laycock, who then gave the famous words at the cabinet council, "an undersized Oxford pug with a tender voice and a package of Greek—the sort of little fool who is brought up on the admiration of his elder sisters."

"All the time about," he said, "I was watching him—thinking what an ass he was to be trusted with man's love. I might have done better to have thought that of myself. I was doing nothing to prevent it all! The damned little incubus was up to his neck in the drama of the thing; he liked to trumpet it out, he goggled round at us. 'Then it is war!' he said. Believer shrugged his shoulders. I made some slight protest and gave in. Afterwards I despised of him."

"What a lot we were! All a little scared at ourselves—all, as it were, instrumental."

"And it's looks like that led to things like this!" He jerked his head at that dead man near by us.

"It will be interesting to know what has happened to the world. The green vapor—poor stuff! But I know what has happened to me. It's Conversion. I've al-

ways known. But this is being a fool. Talk! I'm going to stop it."

He motioned to me with his clumsy, outstretched hands.

"Stop what?" said I, stepping forward instinctively to help him.

"War," he said in his great whisper, putting his big hand on my shoulder but making no further attempt to stir. "I'm going to put an end to war—to any sort of war! And all those things that must end. The world is beautiful, life is great and splendid, we had only to lift up our eyes and see. Think of the glories through which we have been driving, like a herd of swine in a garden place. The color to life—the sounds—the shapes! We have had our jealousies, our quarrels, our filthy rights, our avilable prejudices, our vulgar enterprise and sluggish timidity, we have cluttered and pecked one another and fouled the world—the doves in the temple, like useless birds in the holy place of God. All my life has been foolishness and pettiness, gross pleasures and mean infidelities—all. I am a monster, dark thing in this morning's glow, a pestilence, a shame! And but for God's mercy I might have died this night—like that poor lad there—amidst the splendor of my sin! No more of that! No more of this!—whether the whole world has changed or no, matters nothing. We *have* seen this dawn!"

He pointed.

"I will arise and go unto my Father," he began presently, "and will say unto him—"

His voice died away in an inaudible whisper. His head lightened painfully on my shoulder and he rose.

## CHAPTER TWO SECOND—THE AWAKENING

### I

**S**O the great Day came to me. And even as I had awoken so in that same dawn the whole world awoke.

For the whole world of living things had been overtaken by the same tide of incomprehensible, in an hour, at the touch of this new gas in the comet, the shiver of catalytic change had passed about the globe. They say it was the nitrogen of

the air, the old azote, that in the twinkling of an eye was changed out of itself, and in an hour or so became a respirable gas, differing indeed from oxygen, but helping and sustaining its action, a bath of strength and healing for nerve and brain. I do not know the precise changes that occurred, or the names our chemists give them. My work has carried me away from such things; only this I know—I and all men were renewed.

I picture to myself this thing happening in space, a planetary movement, the film strange, the slender wheel of matter, draw-

ing nearer to this planet—this planet like a ball, like a shaded, rounded ball, floating in the void, with its little, nearly imperceptible, coat of cloud and air, with its dark pools of ocean, its gleaming ridges of land. And as that ridge from the void touches it, the transparent, gaseous outer-shell clouds in an instant green and then slowly clear again.

Thereafter, for three hours or more—we knew the minimum time, for the Change was almost exactly three hours, because all the clocks and watches kept going—everywhere, no man or beast or bird or any living thing that breathes the air stirred at all but lay still.

Everywhere on earth that day, in the eyes of everyone who breathed, there had been the same burning in the air, the same rush of green vapors, the expectation, the steaming drows of shooting stars. The Hindu had stayed his morning's work in the fields to stare and marvel and hush; the blue-clothed Chinaman fell headforemost without his midday bowl of rice; the Japanese merchant came out from some chattering in his office amazed, and presently lay there before his door; the evening games by the Golden Gates were overthrown as they waited for the rising of the great star. This had happened in every city of the world, in every lonely valley, in every house and house and shelter and every open place. On the high seas, the creaking steamship passengers, eager for any wonder, gaped and marveled, and were suddenly terror-stricken, and struggled for the gangways and were overcome; the captain staggered on the bridge and fell, the stoker fell headlong among his rods, the engines thrashed upon their way unattended, the fishing craft drove by without a hail, with swaying rudders, heeling and dipping.

The great voice of material Fate cried Hark! And in the midst of the play the action staggered, dropped, and was still. The figure ran from my pen. In New York that very thing occurred. Most of the theatrical audiences departed, but in two crowded houses the company, fearing a panic, went on playing amidst the gloom, and the people, trained by many a previous disaster, stuck to their seats. There they sat, the back rows only moving a little, and there, in disciplined lines, they dropped and faded, nodded, and fell forward or slid down upon the floor.

I am told by Perroud—though indeed I know nothing of the reasoning on which his confidence rests—that within an hour of the great moment of impact the first green modification of nitrogen had dissolved and passed away, leaving the air as translucent as ever. The rest of that wonderful interlude was clear, had any had eyes to see its clearness. In London it was night, but in New York, for example, people were in the full hurra of the evening's enjoyment, in Chicago they were sitting down to dinner; the whole world was abroad. The moonlight must have lit streets and squares litened with crumpled ligures, through which such electric cars as had no automatic brakes had plowed on their way until they were stopped by the fallen bodies. People lay in their dress clothes, in dining-rooms, restaurants, on staircases, in halls, everywhere just as they had been overcome. Men gambling, men drinking, thrown harking in hidden places, sinful couples, were caught, to arise with awakened mind and conscience amidst the disorder of their sin. America the comet reached in the full tide of evening life, but Britain lay asleep.

But as I have told, Britain did not shudder so deeply but that she was in the full tide of what might have been battle and a great victory. Up and down the North Sea her warships swept together like a net about their loon. On land, too, that night was to have decided great issues. The German camps were under arms from Rastingen to Murbach, their infantry columns were lying in ranks like green lay, in arrested night march on every track between Langeney and Thannourt, and between Arrascourt and Dossin. The hills beyond Spincourt were dotted thick with hidden French riflemen, the thin back of the French skirmishes spread out amidst squares and unfinished rifle pits in coils that wrapped about the heads of the German columns, thence along the Vosges watershed and out across the frontier near Belfort nearly to the Rhine.

The Hungarians, the Italian peasant, yawned and thought the evening dark, and turned over to fall into a dreamless sleep; the Mohammedan world spread its carpet and was taken in prayer. And in Sydney, in Melbourne, in New Zealand, the thing was a big in the afternoon, that scattered the crowds on race courses and cricket fields,

and stopped the unloading of shipping and brought men out from their afternoon rest to stagger and jitter the streets.

## II

My thoughts go into the woods and wilderness and jungles of the world, to the wild life that shared man's suspension, and I think of a thousand feral acts interrupted and truncated, frozen, as it were, like the frozen words Pantagruel met at sea. Not only men it was that were quivered, but all living creatures that breathe the air became insensible, unresponsive things. Motionless brutes and birds lay amidst the drooping trees and herbage in the universal twilight. The tiger sprawled beside his fresh-struck victim, who bled to death in a dreamless sleep. The very fish came sailing down the air with wings outspread; the spider hung crumpled in his loaded net, like some gaily painted acrobatic butterfly drifted to earth and grounded, and was still. And, as a queer contrast, one gathers that the fishes in the sea suffered not at all.

Speaking of the fishes reminds me of a queer little boat upon that great wraith-dreaming. The odd fate of the crew of the submarine vessel *Albat* has always seemed memorable to me. So far as I know, they were the only men alive who never saw that veil of green drawn across the world. All the while that the stillness held above, they were working into the mouth of the Elbe, past the booms and the mines, very slowly and carefully, a slender crustacean of steel, explosive crumpled, along the rocky bottom. They trailed a long line that was to guide their fellows from the mother ship floating amidst perils. Then, in the long channel beyond the forts, they came up at last to mark down their victims and get on. That must have been before the twilight of dawn, for they did it in the brightness of the stars. They were amazed to find themselves not three hundred yards

from an anchored fleet that had run ashore in the mist, and heeled over with the falling tide. It was nine antiships, but no one heeded that—no one in all that strategy, clear silence heeded that—and not only this wrecked vessel, but all the dark ships lying about them, it seemed to their perplexed and startled minds, must be full of dead men!

Theirs I think must have been one of the strangest of all experiences. They were never insensible; at once, and, I am told, with a sudden catch of laughter, they began to breathe the new air. None of them has proved a writer; we have no picture of their wonder, no description of what was said. But we know these men were active and awake for an hour and a half, at least, before the general awakening came, and when at last the Germans stirred and set up, they found these strangers in possession of their battleship, the submarine carefully adrift, and the Englishman, beggared and weary, but with a sort of furious exultation, still buoyed in the bright dawn, recalling innumerable cruises from the sinking configuration.

But the thought of certain sailors the custom of the submarine failed altogether to arouse, brings me back to the thread of grotesque horror that runs through all this event, the thread I cannot overlook for all the splendors of human well-being that have come from it. I cannot forget the unguided ships that drove ashore, that went down in disaster with all their sleeping hands, our bare, aimed, mowed cars rushed to destruction upon the roads, and trains upon the railways kept on in spite of signals, to be found at last by their amazed, reviving drivers standing on unfamiliar loam, their fires exhausted, or, less lucky, to be discovered by automated persons or awakening ponies, crushed and crumpled up into heaps of smoking, crackling mass. The boundary lines of the Four Towns still blazed, the smoke of our burning still defiled the sky. Fires burned inland the brighter for the Change—and spread.

(To be continued)





# In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

*Illustrated by Henry Jones*

## BOOK THE SECOND—THE GREEN VAPORS

### CHAPTER THE SECOND—THE AWAKENING—(CONTINUED)

**SCENE.** The previous incidents deal with happenings in England just before the Great Change, when a huge comet is descending to come in contact with the earth. In addition to hard times and general distresses with existing social conditions, England has gone to war with Germany. The narrative, William Leifford, has become a socialist through the influence of his friend Perkin. This scene leads to the breaking of Leifford's engagement to Nellie Brown. The young man still loves the girl, and when she elopes with Edward Verrill, the son of his father's employer, he follows the couple to a house on the Irish coast. Here he attempts to kill the lovers with his revolver, but the shots go wild, and just then the earth, coming into the comet's path, is enveloped in a gas which renders every living being unconscious. This story lasts a few hours. The narrative concludes with the amazing effect of the gas, which brings about the Great Change.

### III

**P**ICTURE to yourself what happened between the printing and composing of the copy of the "New Paper" that lies before me now. It was the first newspaper that was printed upon earth after the Great Change. It is pocket-size and browned, made of a paper no man ever intended for preservation. I found it on the arched table in the tea garden while I

was waiting for Nellie and Verrill, before that last conversation of which I have presently to tell. As I look at it all that seems comes back to me, and Nellie stands in her white raiment against a blue-green background of sunset gardens, wreathing my face as I read.

It is so faded that the best cracks along the folds and comes to pieces in my hands. It lies upon my desk, a dead souvenir of the dead ages of the world, of the ancient passions of my heart. I know no document so new, but for the life of me I cannot recall what we said, only I remember that



Nettie read very little, and that Verrall for a time read it over my shoulder. And I did not like him to read over my shoulder.

The documents before me must have helped us through the first awkwardness of that meeting.

But of all that we said and did then I must tell in a later chapter.

It is easy to see the "New Paper" had been set up overnight, and then large pieces of the stereo plates replaced subsequently. I do not know enough of the old methods of printing to know precisely what happened. The thing gives me an impression of huge plates of type having been cut away and replaced by fresh blocks. There is something very rough and ready about it all, and the new portions print darker and more strongly than the old except toward the left, where they have missed ink and indented. A friend of mine, who knows something of the old typography, has suggested to me that the machinery actually in use for the "New Paper" was damaged that night, and that on the morning of the Change, Binghamston borrowed a neighboring office—perhaps in financial dependence upon him—to print in.

The outer page being entirely to the old printed. The only parts of the paper that had undergone alteration were the two middle leaves. Here we found, set forth in a curious little four-column oblong of print, WHAT HAD HAPPENED. This cut across a column with verse headings beginning, "Great Naval Battle New in Future— The Fate of Two Empires in the Balance, Reported Last of Two More—"

These things, one gathered, were beneath notice now. Probably a war-pamphlet, and fabricated news in the first instance.

It is curious to piece together the worn and faded fragments, and reveal this discolored first intelligence of the new epoch.

The simple, clear statements in the replaced portions of the paper impressed me at the time, I remember, as bold and strange, in that framework of shouting, hot English. Now they seem like the voice of a sane man amidst a vast faded violence. But they witness to the prompt recovery of London from the panic the new, with energy of rebound in that huge population.

The catalytic wave must have caught the

place in full swing, in its sectional high fever, indeed in a quite exceptional state of fever, what with the sunset and the war, and more particularly with the war. Very probably the Change crept into the office imperceptibly, amidst the noise and shouting, and the glare of electric light that made the night atmosphere in that place. Even the green flames may have passed unnoticed there and the preliminary descending trails of green vapor seemed no more than unreasonable, drifting wisps of London fog.

If there was any warning for them, it must have been a sudden, universal tumult in the street, and then a much more universal quiet. They could have had no other intimation.

There was no time to stop the presses before the main development of green vapor had overwhelmed everyone. It must have looked about them, terrified them in the north, rattled and stifled them. My imagination is always curiously stirred by the thought of that, because I suppose it is the first picture I succeeded in making for myself of what had happened in the town. It has never quite lost its stringency for me that when the Change came, machinery went on working. I don't precisely know why that should have seemed so strange to me, but it did, and still, to a certain extent, does. One is so accustomed, I suppose, to regard machinery as an extension of human personality, that the extent of its autonomy the Change displayed came as a shock to me. The electric lights, for example, busy, green-shaded vehicles, must have gone on burning, at least for a time, amidst the thickening darkness the huge presses must have roared on, printing, folding, throwing aside copy after copy of that fabricated battle report with its quarter columns of crane headlines, and all the place must have still quivered and throbbled with the London roar of the engines. And this though no more ruled there at all any more. Here and there beneath that thickening fog, the crumpled or outstretched forms of men lay still.

A wonderful thing that must have seemed, had any man had, by chance, the power of resistance to the vapor, and would he have walked amidst it?

And now the machines must have exhausted their fuel of ink and paper, and thumped and banged and rattled empty



THAT AWAKENING WENT ABOUT THE EARTH. IT CAME TO EVERYONE NEAR ME, AND FOR THE TIME QUITE FORGOTTEN BY MR. VERMALL AND NEITHER WORD-WOOD NOR EACH OTHER.

amidst the general quiet. Then, I suppose, the furnace failed for want of stoking, the steam pressure fell in the pipes, the machinery slackened, the lights burned dim, and came and went with the ebb of energy from the power station. Who can tell precisely the sequence of these things now?

And then, you know, amidst the weakening and increasing noises of men, the green vapor cleared and vanished; in an hour, indeed, it had gone, and it may be a brown silver and blew and went about the earth.

And then came the first flush of morning, the first rustlings of the revival. Perhaps, in that office, the filaments of the lamps were still glowing, the machinery was still pulsing weakly, when the crumpled, heaped heaps of cloth became men again and began to stir and stare. The chapel of the printers was, no doubt, shocked to find itself asleep. Amidst that dawning dawn the "New Paper" woke to wonder, stood up and blinked at its amazing self.

The clocks of the city churches, now passing number, struck then. The staff, crumpled and disheveled, but with a strange refreshment in their veins, stood about the damaged machinery, musing and questioning; the editor read his overnight headlines with morbidous laughter. There was much involuntary laughter that morning. Outside, the mail-men patted the necks, and rubbed the knees, of their awakening horses.

Then, you know, slowly and with much consternation and doubt, they set about to produce the paper.

Imagine these harassed, perplexed people, carried on by the inertia of those old occupations, and doing their best with an enterprise that had suddenly become altogether extraordinary and irrational. They worked amidst questionings, and yet light-heartedly. At every stage there must have been interruptions for discussion.

#### IV

Then let me give you a vivid little impression I received of a certain private person, a ghost named Wiggins, and how he passed through the Change. I heard this man's story in the post-office at Marrow, when, in the absence of the First Gen., I brought me to telegraph to my mother. The place was also a grocer's

shop, and I found him and the proprietor talking as I went in. They were trade competitors; and Wiggins had just come across the street to break the hostile silence of a score of years. The sparkle of the Change was in their eyes, their slightly flushed cheeks, their more elastic gestures, spoke of new physical adhesions that had invaded their being.

"It did us no good, all our hatred," Mr. Wiggins said to me, explaining the emotion of their encounter, "it did our customers no good. I've come to tell him that. You know that in mind, young man, if ever you come to have a shop of your own. It was a sort of stupid bitterness possessed us, and I can't make out we didn't see it before in that light. Not so much downright wickedness it wasn't, as stupidity. A stupid jealousy! Think of it—two human beings within a stone's throw, who have not spoken for twenty years, hardening our hearts against each other!"

"I can't think how we came to such a state," Mr. Wiggins, said the other, packing ten little pouch packets out of mere habit as he spoke. "It was wicked pride and obstinacy. We knew it was foolish all the time."

I stood affixing the adhesive stamp to my telegram.

"Only the other morning," he went on to me, "I was cutting French eggs. Selling at a loss to do it. He'd marked down with a great staring belief to monopolize a dozen—and use it as I went past. Here's my answer!" He indicated a ticket. "'Eight pence a dozen—want as sold elsewhere for sixpence?' A whole penny down, bang off! Just a touch above cost—if that—and even then—" He looked over the counter to say impressively, "Not the same eggs!"

"Now, what people in their senses would do things like that?" said Mr. Wiggins.

I saw my telegram—the proprietor dispatched it for me, and, while he did so, I led exchanging experiences with Mr. Wiggins. He knew no more than I did then the nature of the change that had come over things. He had been alarmed by the green flashes, he said, so much so that after watching for a time, from behind his bedroom window blind, he had got up and hastily dressed and made his kindly get up also, so that they might be ready for



I REMEMBER NOW QUOTE IN CLAYTON CHRISTIAN CHURCH I SAW ONE SPOTTY, FAT  
FACE DISTORTED UNDER THE PICKERING GAS FLAMES-OLD PAINTY, THE IRON-  
MORON, REPEAT

the end. He made them put on their Sunday clothes. They all went out into the garden together, their minds divided between admiration at the gloriolousness of the spectacle and a great and growing awe. They were Disciples, and very religious people out of business hours; and it seemed to them, in those last magnificent moments, that, after all, science must be wrong and the miracles right. With the grace vapors came conviction, and they prepared to meet their God.

This man, you must understand, was a common-looking man, in his short-dress and with an apron about his paunch, and he told his story in an Anglican accent that sounded mean and clipped to my Staffordshire ears; he told his story without a thought of pride, and, as it were, incidentally, and yet he gave me a vision of something heroic.

These people did not run hither and thither as many people did. These low simple, common people stood beyond their back door in their garden pathway between the gooseberry bushes, with the tenors of their God and his judgments closing in upon them, softly and wonderfully—and there they began to sing. There they stood, father and mother and two daughters, chanting out softly, but, no doubt, a little faintly after the manner of their kind—

"In Zion's Hope shining,  
My soul in Triumph sing——"

until one by one they fell, and lay still.

The postmaster had heard them in the perfuming darkness, "In Zion's Hope shining."

It was the most extraordinary thing in the world to hear this durbled and halcyoned man telling that story of his recent death. It did not seem at all possible to have happened in the last twelve hours. It was minute and remote, those people who were singing through the darkness to their God. It was like a scene shown to me, very small and very distinctly printed, in a book.

But that effect was not confined to this particular thing. A vast number of things that had happened before the coming of the cancer, had undergone the same transfiguring reflection. Other people, too, I have known were, had the same vision, a sense of enlargement. It seems to me

even now that the little dark creature, who had stormed across England in pursuit of Nettie and her lover, must have been about as tall high, that all that previous life of ours had been an ill-in marked-out show, acted in the twilight.

## V

The figure of my mother comes always into my conception of the Change.

I remember how, one day, she confused herself.

She had been very sleepless that night, she said, and took the reports of the falling stars for shooting; there had been rioting in Clayton and all through Southwicks all day, and so she got out of bed to look. She had a dim sense that I was in all such troubles.

But she was not looking when the Change came.

"When I saw the stars a rising down, dear," she said, "and thought of you out in it, I thought there'd be no harm in saying a prayer for you, dear? I thought you wouldn't mind that."

And so I got another of my pictures—the grass vapors come and go, and there by her patched coverlet that dear old woman kneels and droops, still clasping her poor, gnarled hands in the attitude of prayer—prayer to IT—for me!

Through the meager curtains and blinds of the faded, retracting window I see the stars above the chimneys' ribs, the pale light of dawn creeps into the sky, and her smile fades and dies.

That, also, went with me through the stillness—that silent, kneeling figure, that frozen prayer to God to shield me, silent in a silent world, rushing through the emptiness of space.

## VI

With the dawn, that awakening went about the earth. I have told how it came to me, and how I walked in wonder through the transfigured cornfields of Sheppardsbury. It came to everyone. Near me, and for the time, clean forgotten by me, Verrell and Nettie woke—wake near each other. Each heard, before all other sounds, the other's voice amidst the stillness and the light. And the scattered people who had run to and fro, and fallen on the bench of

the hangover village, a waltz. The sleeping villagers of Manton stirred, and sat up in that unworldly freshness and openness, the contorted figures in the garden, with the hymn still upon their lips, stirred amidst the flowers, and touched each other timidly, and thought of Paradise. My mother found herself crooked against the bed, and rose—rose with a glad, indefinable conviction of accepted prayer.

Already, when it came to us, the soldiers, crowded between the lines of dusty poplars along the road to Albernont, were chatting and sharing coffee with the French riflemen, who had belied them from their carefully hidden pits among the vineyards up the slopes of Beaucelle. A certain perspicacity had come to these marksmen, who had dropped asleep, heavily ready for the soldier that should wake the wiles and rattle of their magazines. At the sight and sound of the stir and human confusion in the roadway below, it had come to each man individually that he could not shoot. One conscript, at least, has told his story of his awakening, and how curious he thought the rifle there beside him in his pit, how he took it on his knees to examine. Then, as his memory of its purpose grew clearer, he dropped the thing, and stood up with a kind of joyful horror at the crime escaped, to look more closely at the men he was to have annihilated. "Seven types," he thought; they looked for such a fate. The retreating rocket went down. Below, the men did not fall into ranks again, but sat by the roadside, or stood in groups talking, discussing with a novel lucidity the ostensible causes of the war.

The officers held their own horses, and talked to the men fruitfully, regardless of discipline. Some Frenchmen out of the rifle-pits came wandering down the hill. Others stood doubtfully, rifle still in hand. Curious faces scanned their letters. Little arguments sprang up: "Shoot at us! No more!" They're respectable French citizens." There is a picture of it all, very bright and detailed in the morning light, in the battle gallery amidst the ruins at old Nancy, and one sees the old-world uniform of the "soldier," the old caps and belts and boots, the conversation belt, the water bottle, the sort of master's pack the men carried, a quack, elaborate equipment. The soldiers had awakened one by one,

first one and then another. I wonder sometimes whether, perhaps, if the two armies had come awake in an instant, the battle, by mere habit and inertia, might not have begun. But the men who waked first, sat up, looked about them in astonishment and had time to think a little.

## VII

Everywhere there was laughter, everywhere tears.

Men and women in the common life, finding themselves suddenly fit and exalted, capable of doing what had hitherto been impossible, incapable of doing what had hitherto been irresistible, happy, hopeful, unselfishly energetic, rejected altogether the supposition that this was merely a change in the blood and material texture of life. They denied the bodies God had given them, as once the Upper Nile swarms struck out their canine teeth, because those made them like the beasts. They declared that this was the coming of a spirit, and nothing else would satisfy their need for explanations. And in a word the Spirit came. The Great Rerelal sprang directly from the Change—the last, the deepest, widest, and most enduring of all the vast revolutions of religious emotion that go by that name.

But indeed it differed markedly from its innumerable predecessors. The former rerelals were a phase of fear. This was the first movement of health; it was altogether quieter, more intellectual, more private, more religious than any of those others. In the old time, and more especially in the Protestant countries where the things of religion were outspoken, and the absence of confession and well-trained priests made religious crises of emotion explosive and contagious, rerelals upon various scales was a normal phase in the religious life. Rerelals were always giving us—now a little disturbance of conscience in a village, now an evening of emotion in a school room, now a great storm that swept a continent, and now an organized effort that came to men with hands and hearts and handbills and motor cars for the saving of souls. Never at any time did I take part in, or was I attracted by, any of these movements. My nature, although passionate, was too critical for skeptical if you like, for it amounts to the

same thing) and shy to be drawn into these whorls; but on several occasions Pauline and I sat, smiling, but nevertheless disturbed, in the back seats of revivalist meetings.

I saw enough of them to understand their nature, and I am not surprised to learn now that before the comet came, all about the world, even among savages, even among cannibals, there came, or at any rate closely similar, periodic upheavals went on. The world was stifling, it was in a fever, and these phenomena were neither more nor less than the instinctive struggle of the organism against the clog of its powers, the clogging of its veins, the limitation of its life. Inevitably, these revivals followed periods of world and national living. Men obeyed their base, immediate motives until the world grew unendurably bitter. Some disappointment, some thwarting, lit up for them—darkly indeed, but yet enough for indistinct vision—the crowded squares, the dark inclosures of life. A sudden disgust with the intimate smallness of the old-world way of living, a realization of sin, a sense of the unworthiness of all individual things, a desire for something comprehensive, satisfying, something greater, for wider commandments and less habitual things, filled them. Their souls, which were shaped for wider issues, cried out suddenly amidst the petty interests, the narrow prohibitions of life, "Not this! not this!" A great passion to escape from the jealous prison of themselves, an articulate, summing-up, sweeping passion, shook them.

I have seen—— I remember how once in Clayton Catholic Methodist chapel I saw—how spotty, fat face strangely distorted under the flickering gas flame—old Puller, the house-singer, repeat. He went to the form of expectation, a bench reserved for such exhibitions, and stabbed out his names and disgust for some indignity—he was a widower—and indeed I can see now how his loose, fat body quivered and arrayed with his grief. He peered it out to five hundred people, from whose in common times he hid his every thought and purpose. And it is a fact, it shows where reality lay, that we two youngsters laughed not at all at that blubbing grotesque, we did not even think the distant shadow of a smile. We two sat grave and moony—perhaps wondering.

Only afterwards and with an effort did we smile.

Those old-time revivals were, I say, the convulsive movements of a body that suffocates. They are the closest manifestations from before the Change, of a sense in all men that things were not right. But they were too often but momentary illuminations. Their faces spent itself in incoordinated shouting, postulation, tears. They were hot flashes of outlook. Digest of the narrow life, of all business, took shape as narrowness and baseness. The quickened soul ended the night a hypocrite; prophets disputed for precedence; anathemas, it is altogether indisputable, were frequent among penitents; and Ananias went home converted and returned with a falsified gift. And it was almost universal that the converted should be impatient and immoderate, scornful of reason and a chaos of expedients, opposed in balance, skill and knowledge. Incontinently full of grace, like that, old wine-skins overfilled, they felt they must burst if once they came into contact with hard fact and sane direction.

So the former revivals spent themselves; but the Great Revival did not spend itself, but grew to be, for the majority of Christians at least, the permanent expression of the Change. For many, it has taken the shape of an outright declaration that this was the Second Advent. It is not for me to discuss the validity of that suggestion; for nearly all of it has amounted to an echoing broadening of all the issues of life.

## VIII

One irrelevant memory comes back to me, irrelevant, and yet, by some subtle touch of quality, it summarizes the Change for me. It is the memory of a woman's very beautiful face, a woman with a flushed face and tear-bright eyes who went by me without speaking, except in some secret purpose. I passed her when in the afternoon of the first day, struck by a sudden remembrance, I went down to Menton to send a telegram to my mother telling her all was well with me. Whether this woman went I do not know, nor whence she came, I never saw her again, and only her face, glowing with that new and luminous resolve, stands out for me.

But that expression was the work's.

## CHAPTER THE FIFTH—THE CABINET COUNCIL.



AND what a strange, unprecedented thing was that cabinet council at which I was present, the council that was held two days later in Melmount's bungalow, and which concerned the conference to frame the constitution of the World State. I was there because it was convenient for me to stay with Melmount. I had nowhere to go particularly, and there was no one at his bungalow, to which his broken ankle confined him, but a secretary and a valet to help him to keep his share of the enormous labors that evidently lay before the rulers of the world. I wrote shorthand, and as there was not even a photograph available, I went in so soon as his valet had been dressed, and sat at his desk to write at his dictation. It is characteristic of the odd darkness that went with the spasmodic violence of the old epoch, that the secretary could not see shorthand and that there was no telephone whatever in the place. Every message had to be taken to the village post-office in that grocer's shop at Marston, half a mile away.

So I sat in the back of Melmount's room; his desk had been thrust aside, and I made such arrangements as were needed. At that time his room seemed to me the most beautifully furnished in the world, and I could clearly now see the vivid cheerfulness of the chairs of the sofa on which the great statesman lay just in front of me, the fine oak paper, the red sealing-wax, the silver aquapage of the desk I used. I know now that my presence in that room was a strange and remarkable thing, the open door, even the coming and going of Parker the secretary, innovations. In the old days a cabinet council was a secret conference, secrecy and furtiveness were in the texture of all public life. In the old days everybody was always keeping something back from somebody, being wary and cunning, prevaricating, misleading—for the most part, for no reason at all. Almost unnoticed, that secrecy had dropped out of life.

I close my eyes and see those men again, hear their deliberating voices. First I see

them a little dimly in the cold splendor of daylight, and then concentrated and drawn together amidst the shadows and mystery about shaded lamps. Integral to this and very clear, is the memory of linseed crumbs and a drop of spilt water, that at first stood shining upon, and then sank into, the green tablecloth.

I remember particularly the figure of Lord Ashburn. He came to the bungalow a day before the others, because he was Melmount's personal friend. Let me describe this statesman to you, this one of the fifteen men who made the last war. He was the youngest member of the government, and an altogether pleasant and merry man of forty. He had a clear profile to his clean gray face, a smiling eye, a friendly, careful voice upon his thin, clean-shaven lips, an easy, disarming manner. He had the perfect quality of a man who had fallen easily into a place prepared for him. He had the temperament of what we used to call a philosopher—an indifferent, that is to say. The Change had caught him at his work-and recreation, fly-fishing; and, indeed, he said, I remember, that he resented to find himself with his hand within a yard of the water's brim. In times of crisis, Lord Ashburn invariably went fly-fishing at the week-end to keep his mind in tune, and when there was no crisis, then there was nothing he liked so much to do as fly-fishing, and so, of course, as there was nothing to prevent it, he fished. He came involved, among other things, to give up fly-fishing altogether. I was present when he came to Melmount, and heard him say as much; and, by a more naive route, it was evident that he had arrived at the same scheme of intention as my master. I left them to talk, but afterward I came back to take down their long telegrams to their coming colleagues. He was, no doubt, as profoundly affected as Melmount by the Change, but his tricks of civility and irony and acceptable humor had survived the Change, and he expressed his altered attitude, his expanded emotions, in a quiet modification of the old-time man-of-the-world style, with excessive moderation, with a trained humor of the enthusiasm that rayed him.

Those fifteen men who ruled the British



empires were curiously unlike anything I had expected, and I watched them intently whenever my services were not in request. They made a peculiar class at that time, these English politicians and statesmen, a class that has now completely passed away. In some respects they were unlike the statesmen of any other region of the world, and I do not find that any really adequate account remains of them. Perhaps you are a reader of the old books. If so, you will find them rendered, with a note of hostile suggestion, by Dickens in "Black House", with a mingling of gross flattery and keen ridicule by Dumas, who ruled among them accidentally by misreading them and placing the court; and all their assumptions are set forth, potently, perhaps, but truthfully, as far as people of the "permanent official" class saw them, in the novels of Mrs. Humphry Ward. All these books are still in this world and at the disposal of the curious, and, in addition, the philosopher Hegel and the picturesque historian Macaulay give something of their method of thinking, the socialist Thackeray starts the enemy side of their social life, and there are some good passages of irony, personal description, and reminiscence to be found in the "Twentieth Century Garner" from the pens of such writers, for example, as Sidney Law. But a picture of them as a whole is wanting. Then they were too near and too great; now, very rapidly, they have become incomprehensible.

We common people of the old time based our conception of our statesmen almost entirely on the caricatures that formed the most powerful weapon in political controversy. Like almost every male feature of the old condition of things these caricatures were an unanticipated development; they were a sort of parasitic outgrowth. They presented not only the personalities who led our public life, but the most sacred structural conceptions of that life, in ludicrous, vulgar, and dishonorable aspects that, in the end, came near to destroying entirely all grave and honorable emotion or action toward the state. The state of Britain was represented nearly always by a red-faced, port-wine-colored farmer with an enormous belly; that fine dream of London, the United States, by a cunning, lecherous man in striped trousers and a blue coat. The chief ministers of state were

pickpockets, swindlers, cowards, slaves, asses, glaphagos, and what not; and issues that affected the welfare of millions of men were discussed and judged like a rally in some idiotic pastime. A tragic war in South Africa, that worked many thousand homes, impoverished two whole lands, and brought death and dishonour to fifty thousand men, was presented as a quite casual quarrel between a violent, queer being named Chamberlain, with an eyeglass, an arch, and a short temper, and "old Kruyer," an obstinate and very cunning old man in a shocking bad hat. The conflict was carried through in a mood sometimes of British inflexibility and sometimes of lax slovenliness, the merry politician plied his trade congenially in that salacious equilibrium, and belied those insidious and masked by them, marched Fata, and, at last, the shrouding of the truth opened and revealed—fury and suffering, brains burning and swords and shame. These men had come to learn and power in that atmosphere, and to me that day there was the oddest suggestion in those of actors who have suddenly laid aside grotesque and foolish parts; the paint was washed from their faces, the posing put aside.

Even when the presentation was not frankly grotesque and degrading it was utterly misleading. When I read of Laycock, for example, there arose a picture of a large, active, if a little wrong-headed, intelligent in a compact, heroic body, emitting that "Coltish" speech of his that did so much to precipitate hostilities. It tallied not at all with the stammering, high-pitched, slightly hoarse, and very conscience-stricken passages I saw, nor with Milneau's contemporaneous first description of him. I doubt if the world at large will ever get a proper vision of those men as they were before the Change. Each year, they pass more and more incredibly beyond our intellectual sympathy.

Our extravagant contempt, indeed, rob them of their portion in the past, but it will rob them of any effect of reality. The whole of their history became more and more foreign, more and more like some queer, haphazard drama played in a forgotten tongue. Then they came through their weird metamorphoses of caricature, those pretense and postures, their height posterously exaggerated by political fac-

lans, their faces covered by great, resistant, inkman masks, their voices, crunched in the foolish ideas of public utterance, disguised beyond any resemblance to sane humanity, roaring and squeaking through the public press. There it stanch, the incomprehensible, faded show, a thing left on one side, and now still and deserted by any interest, its many emphases as last-pleasable now as the crackles of medieval Venetian, the theology of old Byzantium. And they ruled and influenced the lives of nearly a quarter of mankind, these politicians; their domineering conduct, swayed the world, made north perhaps, made excitement, and permitted—infinite misery.

I saw these men quiescent, indeed, by the Change, but still wearing the queer clothing of the old time, the manners and conversations of the old time. If they had disengaged themselves from the outlook of the old time they still had to refer back to it constantly in a common starting point. My refreshed intelligence was equal to that, so that I think I did, indeed, see them. There was Gerrit-Browning, the chancellor of the duchy; I remember him as a big, round-faced man, the cerebral void and foolishness of whose expression, whose habit of voluminous platitudinous speech, triumphed abominably once or twice over the roused spirit within. He struggled with it, he harlequined himself, and laughed. Suddenly he said simply, intensely—it was a moment for everyone of clear, clear pain—"I have been a vain and self-indulgent and presumptuous old man. I am of little use here. I have given myself to politics and intrigues, and life is gone from me." Then for a long time he sat still. There was Carton, the hard chancellor, a white-faced man with understanding; he had a heavy, shaven face that might have stood among the hosts of the Crusade, a slow, elaborating voice, with self-indulgent, slightly oblique, and triumphant lips, and a momentary, voluntary, humorous twinkle. "We have to forgive," he said. "We have to forgive—even ourselves."

These two were at the top corner of the table, so that I saw their faces well. Mad-gott, the home secretary, a smaller man with wrinkled eyebrows and a frozen smile on his thin, dry mouth, came next to Carton. He contributed little to the discussion save intelligent comments, and when the electric lights above glowed out,

the shadows deepened quickly in his eyebrows and gave him the quizzical expression of an ironical golden. Next to him was that great poet, the Earl of Richerby, whose self-indulgent inclinations had accepted the rôle of a twentieth-century British-Roman patronus of culture, who had divided his time almost equally between his jockeys, politics, and the composition of literary studies in the key of his rôle. "We have done nothing worth doing," he said. "As for me, I have cut a figure!" He reflected—no doubt on his ample patrician years, on the fine, great houses that had been his setting, the towering race courses that had reared his name, the enthusiastic meetings he had led with fine hopes, the futile Olympian beginnings. "I have been a fool," he said complacently. They heard him in a sympathetic and respectful silence.

Gurber, the chancellor of the exchequer, was partially occupied, so far as I was concerned, by the back of Lord Aditham. Ever and again Gurber protruded into the discussion, sweeping forward, a deep throaty voice, a big nose, a coarse mouth with a drooping, everted lower lip, eyes peering amidst folds and wrinkles. He made his confession for his race. "We Jews," he said, "have gone through the system of this world, creating nothing, consolidating many things, destroying much. Our moral self-conscience has been monstrous. We seem to have used our ample, coarse intellectuality for no other purpose than to develop and master and maintain the corruption of property, to turn life into a sort of mercantile class and spend our whole life greedily. We have had no sense of service to mankind. Beauty, which is godhead—we made it a possession."

One got a queer impression that except perhaps for Gurber or Reed these men had not particularly wanted the power they held; had desired to do nothing very much in the positions they had secured. They had found themselves in the cabinet, and until this moment of illumination they had not been ashamed; but they had made no ungenerously far above the matter. Eight of that fifteen came from the same school, had gone through an entirely partial education—some Greek legends, some elementary mathematics, some enunciated "science," a little history, a little reading

is the strict or timidly orthodox English literature of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. All eight had imbibed the same dull gentlemanly tradition of behavior; externally boyish, unimaginative—with neither love, youth nor art in it, a tradition apt to slither into sentiment at a crisis and make a great virtue of a simple duty rather clumsily done. None of these eight had made any real engagements with life. They had lived in blinkers, they had been passed from tutor to governor, from governor to preparatory school, from Eton to Oulst rd, from Oxford to the political-social routine. Even their views and lapses had been according to certain conceptions of good form. They had all gone to the races unrepentantly from Eton, had all cut up to town from Oxford to see life—music—half life—had all come to heel again. Now suddenly they discovered their limitations.

"What are we to do?" asked Melmoun.  
 "We have awakened; this is our new basis—"  
 "I know this will seem the most

absurd of all the things I have to tell of the old order, but, indeed, I saw it with my eyes, I heard it with my ears. It is a fact that this group of men who constituted the government of one-fifth of the habitable land of the earth, who ruled over a million of armed men, who had such service as mankind had never seen before, whose empire of nations, tongues, peoples still dwains in their greater days, had no common idea whatever of what they meant to do with the world. They had been a government for three long years, and before the Change came to them, it had never even occurred to them that it was necessary to have a common idea. There was no common idea at all. That great empire was no more than a thing adrift, an aimless thing that ate and drank and slept and bore some, and was voraciously proud of itself because it had chance to happen. It had no plan, no intention; it meant nothing at all. And the other great empire adrift, perfectly adrift like marine mines, was in the self-same case.

(To be continued.)



## Her Garden

BY CHARLOTTE BECKER

PASSENGERS, that were her thoughts, ran riot here,  
 Roses, that were her dreams, their perfume shed,  
 Tall trees, she wooed, arch o'erhead,  
 And many lilacs, that she smiled on, near  
 Their stalks in scarlet pride; white, sweet and clear,  
 The thrushes all the even with music thrud—  
 Not wistfully, as those who mourn their dead,  
 But glad as if her presence hovered near.

And who shall doubt but that she does return  
 To breathe the fragrance of her blossomed bowers,  
 And whisper among roses and the fern,  
 Where her white heart once opened like the flowers;  
 Or then, each year, when earth is warm with spring,  
 Somewhere she walks apart—remembering.



# In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

*Illustrated by Henry Jones*

## BOOK THE SECOND—THE GREEN FIFONS

### CHAPTER THE THIRD—THE CABINET CHAMBER—(CONTINUED)

WELLS: The previous incidents deal with happenings in England just before the Great Change, when a huge comet is threatening to come in contact with the earth. In addition to hard times and general distresses with running social machines, England has gone to war with Germany. The narrative, William Lealand, has become a socialist through the influence of his friend Percival. This move leads to the breaking of Lealand's engagement to Maria "Maer". The young man still loves the girl, and when she drops with Edward Verall, the son of his father's employer, he follows the couple to a point on the East coast. Here he attempts to kill the lovers with his revolver. But the shots go wild, and just then the earth, rushing over the comet's path, is enveloped in a gas which renders every living being unconscious. This also kills a big beast. Humanly then awakes to a changed world. Men find that they have new aims, new ambitions, new desires.

### II



REMEMBER as one thing that struck me very sorely at the time—the absence of any discussion and difference of opinion about the broad principles of our present state. These men had lived hitherto in a system of conventions and acquired notions, loyalty to a party, loyalty to various secret agreements and understandings, loyalty to the crown. They had all been capable

of the latest attention to provisions, all capable of the most rampant suppression of subversive doubts and inquiries, all had their religious emotions under perfect control. They had seemed protected in inviolable but impenetrable barriers from all the harsh and destructive speculations, the socialistic, republican, and communist theories that one may still trace through the fragments of the last days of the comet. But now it was as if, in the very moment of the awakening, those barriers and defenses had van-ished, as if the green vapors had washed through their minds and dis-

rolled and swept away a hundred once rigid boundaries and obstacles. They had admitted and assimilated at once all that was good in the distressed propagandas that had clamored so vehemently and vainly at the doors of their minds in the former days. It was exactly like the awakening from an absurd and limiting dream. They had come out together mutually and inevitably upon the broad-daylight platform of obvious and reasonable agreement upon which we and all the order of our world now stand.

Let me try to give the chief things that had vanished from their minds. There was, first, the ancient system of "ownership" that made such an extraordinary tangle of our administration of the land upon which we lived. In the old time no one believed in that as either just or ideally convenient, but everyone accepted it. The community which lived upon the land was supposed to have waived its necessary connection with the land, except in certain limited instances of highway and common. All the rest of the land was cut up in the easiest way into patches and clumps and triangles of various sizes between a hundred-square miles and a few acres, and placed under the nearly absolute government of a series of administrators called *landowners*. They viewed the land almost as a map, how came he that they bought it and sold it, and cut it up like cheese or kum; they were free to ruin it, or leave it waste, or erect upon it horrible and devastating eyotowers. If the community needed a road or a turnpike, if it wanted a town or a village in any position, nay, even if it wanted to go to and fro, it had to do so for exorbitant treaties with each of the monarchs whose territory was involved. No man could find foothold on the face of the earth until he had paid toll and homage to one of them. They had practically no relations and no duties to the normal, municipal, or national government amidst whose larger areas their own domains lay.

The schools, I know, like a hunter's den, but mankind was that hunter. And not only in the old countries of Europe and Asia, where this system had arisen out of the national deliquency of local control in territorial magnates, who had, in the universal business of those times, at first altogether avoided and evaded their duties,

did it obtain, but the "new countries," as we called them then—the United States of America, the Cape Colony, Australia, and New Zealand—spent much of the nineteenth century in the frantic giving away of land forever to any casual person who would take it. Was there coal, was there petroleum or gold, was there rich soil or harborage, or the site for a fine city, these crowned and white governments cried out for assemblies, and a stream of shabby, tricky, and violent adventurers set out to found a new section of the loaded anatomy of the world. After a brief century of hope and pride, the great republic of the United States of America, the hope, as it was dreamed, of mankind, became, for the most part, a drifting crowd of homeless men, landless and without lords, foodless (for the land is dead) and mineral lords ruled its life, gave it universities as one gave coins to a mendicant, and spent its resources upon such sins, lawless, and foolish luxuries as the world had never seen before. Here was a thing none of these statesmen before the Chamber would have regarded as anything but the natural order of the world, which not one of them now regarded as anything but the mad and vanished dream of a period of dementia.

And as it was with the question of the land, so was it also with a hundred other systems and institutions and complicated and disorganizing factors in the life of man. They spoke of trade, and realized for the first time there could be buying and selling that was no loss to any man. They spoke of industrial organization, and one saw it under systems who sought no base advantage. The hate of old associations, of personal entanglements and habitual negotiations had been dispelled from every stage and process of the social training of men. Things long hidden appeared discovered with an amazing clearness and nakedness. These men who had overlooked haggard devilment loaths, and the old muddle of schools and colleges, books and traditions, the old fustling, half-figurative, half-formal teaching of the churches, the complex webworking and combining superstitions and lies, amidst which the youth and honor of adult-ages drifted and stumbled and fell, became nothing but a canvas and phantasmically faded memory. "There must be a common training of the

young," said Rochester, "a frank intention. We have not so much educated them as hidden things from them, and set traps. And it might have been so easy—it can all be done so easily."

That hangs in my memory as the refrain of that counsel, "It can all be done so easily," but when they used it then, it came

late. A truce had already been arranged by Melmont, and their mission, after some nervous reminiscences, set aside the matter of peace as a mere question of particular arrangements. The whole scheme of the world's government had become fluid and provisional as their minds in small details as in great.



A GLIMPSE OF LONDON, THEN CITY OF LONDON ENGLAND, WITH THE WINDING RIVER CITY ON THE THAMES IN FOREGROUND.

to me even with a quality of enormous refinement and power. It can all be done so easily, given frankness, given courage. Time was when these platitudes had the freshness and wonder of a gospel.

In this enlarged outlook the war with the Germans—that moribund, heroic, armed ferocity, Germany, had vanished from men's imaginations—we were a mere rehearsal-act.

"What are the new needs?" said Melmont. "This republic is now rotten to handle. We're beginning again. Well, let us begin afresh."

### III

"Let us begin afresh!" The phrase of almost common sense seemed then to me

instinct with change, the soldier of words. My heart went out to him as he spoke. It was, indeed, that day as vague as it was vibrant; we did not at all see the forms of what we were then beginning. All that we saw was the clear inevitableness that the old order should end.

And then, in a little space of time, mankind in having had effectual brotherhood was moving out to make its world new. Those early years, those first and second decades of the new epoch, were in their daily denial a time of rejecting both one—we chiefly our own share in that, and both of the whole. It is only now as I look back at it all from these ripe years, from this high tower, that I see the dramatic import of its changes, see the cruel old confusion of the ancient time become clarified, simplified, and disorder and vanity away. Where is that old world now? Where is London, that smother city of smoke and drifting darkness, full of the deep roar and haunting music of disorder, with its city, shining, mud-strewn, lamp-crowded street, its black passages and blackened dome, its sad wilderness of smoky-grayed houses, its myriads of drugged women, its millions of hurrying clerks? The very leaves upon its trees were foul with grime, black with smoke. Where is long-white Paris, with its green and despoiled foliage, its hard, unflinching tall thinness, its smartly organized wickedness, and the myriads of workers, nobly clad, streaming over the bridges in the gray cold light of dawn? Where is New York, the high city of change and unmeasured energy, wind vane, and corruption swept, its huge buildings jostling one another and streaming ever upward for a place in the sky, the fallen pitilessly overshadowed? Where are its lurking corners of hunger and costly luxury, the shameful, black-pooling, trifling vice of its ill ruled universities, and all the giant, extravagant ugliness of its strenuous life? And where now is Philadelphia, with its handsome small and isolated home? And Chicago, with its interminable, blood-stained stock yards, its polygon underworld of human discomfort?

All these great cities have given way and gone, even to our written pictures; and the Black Country have gone and the lives that were made, repaired, started, and consumed amidst their laboratories, their for-

gotten and neglected maladjustments, and their vast, unknown, all-absorbed industrial machinery, have escaped—to life. Those cities of growth and accident are altogether gone. Never a chimney smokes about our world to-day, and the sound of the weeping of children who toiled and hungered, the dull despair of overburdened women, the noise of brute quarrels in alleys, all dramatic pleasures and all the ugly grossness of smugly pride have gone with them, with the utter change in our lives. As I look back into the past I see a vast exultant dust of home-breaking and removal rise up into the clear air that belated the haze of the green vapors. I live again the Year of Tears, the Year of Seafaring, and like the triumph of a new theme in a piece of music the great cities of our new days arise. Come Canton and Amsterdam, the twin cities of lower England, with the winding summer city of the Thames between, and I see the great dot of old Edinburgh due to rise again white and tall behind the shadow of her ancient hill. And Dublin too, re-eked, returning stretched, idle, spacious, the city of rich laughter and warm hearts, gleaming gayly in a dash of sunlight through the veil, warm rain. I see the great cities America has planned and made; the Golden City, with ever-opening fruit along its broad warm ways, and the bell-glad City of a Thousand Spires. I see again, as I have seen, the city of shadows and meeting-places, the City of the Night, and the new city that is still called Utah, and dominated by its observatory dome and the plain and dignified lines of the university despite upon the cliff, Manchester, the great, white, water city of the upland west.

And the lesser places, too, the townships, the quiet meeting places, villages half lost with a breath of stress down their streets, villages leant with anxious of order, all lugs of garden, of rose- and wonderful flowers and the perpetual humming of bees. And through all the world as our children, our son—the old world would have made into verule chicks and shopmen, plow drudges and servants, our daughters who were erst and now drudges, prostitutes, sluts, as victimized mothers or sons, repining fathers—they go about this world glad and brave, learning, being, doing, happy and weeping, loving and free. I think of them wandering in the clear quiet of the rain of

Rome, among the tombs of Egypt or the temples of Athens, of their coming to Kensington and its strange happiness, to Urbs and the wonder of its white and gleaming towers. But who can tell of the fallen—and

pleasure of life, who can number all our new cities in the world?—cities made by the loving hands of men for living men, cities men want to enter, so fair they are, so graceful and so kind!

### BOOK THE THIRD—THE NEW WORLD

#### CHAPTER THE FIRST—LOVE AFTER THE CHANGE

##### I

SO far I have told nothing of Nettie. I have departed widely from my individual story. I have tried to give you the effect of the change in relation to the general framework of human life, its effect of swift, magnificent death, of an overpowering letting go and inauguration of light and the spirit of living. In my memory all my life before the change has the quality of a dark passage, with the distant side gleams of beauty that come and go. The rest is dull pain and darkness. Then suddenly the walls, the bitter confines, are unmade and vanish, and I walk, blinded, perplexed, and yet rejoicing, in this sweet, beautiful world, in its fair momentary beauty, its consolation, its opportunities, available in this glorious gift of life.

And then out of that luminous haze of gladness comes Nettie, transfigured. She comes back, and Verrall is in her company. She comes back into my memory now, just as she came back then, rather quietly at first—at first not seen very clearly, a little dimmed by interesting things, as I saw her through the slightly discoloured panes of cracked glass in the window of the Mission post-office and grocer's shop. It was on the second day after the change, and I had been sending telegrams for Melancton, who was making arrangements for his departure to Downing Street. I saw the two of them at first as small, blurred figures. The glass made them seem curved, and it enhanced and altered their gestures and poses. I felt it become me to say "Peace" to them, and I went out, to the peeping of the doorbell. At the sight of me they stopped short, and Verrall cried with the note of one who has sought, "Here he is!" And Nettie cried, "Willie!"

I went toward them, and all the perspectives of my reconstructed universe altered as I did so.

I started to see these two for the first time; how fair they were, how graceful and human. It was as though I had never really looked at them before, and, indeed, always before I had looked them through a mist of selfish passion. They had shared the universal darkness and despairing of the former time; they shared the universal exultation of the new. Now suddenly Nettie, and the love of Nettie, lived again to me. This change which had enlarged men's hearts had made no end to love. Indeed, it had enormously enlarged and glorified love. She stepped into the center of that dream of world-reconstruction that filled my mind, and took possession of it all.

I took her outstretched hand, and wonder overwhelmed me. "I wanted to tell you," I said simply, trying to grasp that idea. It seemed now like stating the stars, or measuring the sunlight.

"Afterwards we looked for you," said Verrall, "and we could not find you. We found another chat."

I turned my eyes to him, and Nettie's hand fell from me. It was then I thought of how they had fallen together, and what it must have been to have awakened in that darkness with Nettie by one's side. I had a vision of them as I had glimpsed them last amidst the thickening vapours, close together, hand in hand. The green birds of the Change spread their darkling wings above their last shuddering poses. So they fell. And awoke—lovers together in a morning of Paradise. Who can tell how bright the sunshine was to them, how fair the flowers, how sweet the singing of the birds?

This was the thought of my heart. But my lips were saying, "When I awake I shan't my grief away." Short darknesses lent my thoughts sleep for a little while, I said empty things. "I am very glad I did



not kill you—that you are here, so fair and well."

"I am going back to Clayton on the day after to-morrow," I said, breaking away to explanations. "I have been writing short-hand here for Malincent, but that is almost over now."

Neither of them said a word, and though all their heads suddenly ceased to enter anything, I went on informatively: "He it is he taken to Downing Street where there is a proper staff, so that there will be no need of me. Of course, you're a little perplexed at me being with Malincent. You see I met him—by accident—directly I recovered. I found him with a broken ankle—in that lane. I am to go now to the Four Towns to help prepare a report. So that I am glad to see you both again"—I found a catch in my voice—"to say good-by to you, and wish you well."

I stopped, and we stood for a moment in silence, looking at one another.

It was I, I think, who was discovering most. I was realising for the first time how little the Change had altered my essential nature. I had forgotten this business of love for a time in a world of wonder. That was all. Nothing was lost from my nature, nothing had gone, only the power of thought and restraint had been wonderfully increased, and new interests had been forced upon me. Nettie's personal charm for me was only quickened by the enhancement of my perceptions. In her presence, meeting her eyes, instantly my desire, no longer frantic but sane, was awake again.

I relinquished her hand. It was absurd to part in these terms. We settled we would come to the inn at Manton and take our midday meal together.

## II

While I waited for Nettie and Verrall in that agreeable resting place, I talked to the landlady—a broad-shouldered, sinking, freckled woman—about the morning of the Change. That motherly, abundant, red-haired figure of health was heavenly sure that everything in the world was now to be changed for the better. That confidence, and something in her voice, made me love her as I talked to her. "Now we're wakin'," she said, "all sorts of things will be put right that hadn't any sense in them. What? Oh! I'm sure of it."

Her kind blue eyes met mine in an infinite of friendliness. Her lips in her pleasant smile.

Old tradition was strong in me, all English men in those days charged the unexpected, and I asked what our lunch was to cost.

"Pay or not," she said, "and what you like. It's holidays, these days. I suppose we'll still have paying and charging, however we manage it, but it won't be the worry it has been—that I feel sure. It's the part I never had any fancy for. Many a time I peeped through the bushes worrying to think what was just and right to me and mine, and what would send 'em away satisfied. It isn't the money I care for. There'll be mighty changes, be sure of that, but here I'll stay, and make people happy—them that go by on the roads. It's a pleasant place here when people are merry. It's odd when they're jealous, or mean, or tired, or set up beyond any woman's dignifying, or when they've got the drink in 'em that Satan comes into this garden. Many's the happy face I've seen here, and many that come again like friends, but nothing to equal what's going to be, now things are being set right."

She smiled, that beamous woman, with the joy of life and hope. "You shall have an omelette," she said, "you and your friends; such an omelette—like they'll have 'em in heaven! I feel there's cooking in me these days like I've never cooked before. I'm rejoiced to have it to do."

It was just then that Nettie and Verrall appeared under a rustic archway of crimson roses that led out from the inn. Nettie wore white and a sun-hat, and Verrall was a figure of gray. "Here are my friends," I said, but for all the range of the Change, something passed about the twilight in my soul like the passing of the shadow of a cloud. "A pretty couple," said the landlady, as they crossed the velvet green toward us.

They were indeed a pretty couple, but that did not greatly gladden me. No—I worried a little at that.

## III

It is the dawn of the new day, but we hear, all three of us, the marks and voices of the old. I see my self, a dark, ill-dressed youth, with the brave Lord Rother gone



DETERMINED I LOOKED UP. BETTER HAD LONGER TIME

me still blue and yellow beneath my jaw, and young Verrall sits opposite to me, better grown, better dressed, fair and quiet, two years my senior indeed, but looking no older than I, because of his light complexion, and opposite me is Nettie, with dark eyes upon my face, greener and more beautiful than I had ever seen her in the former time. Her dress is still that white one she had worn when I came upon her in the park, and still about her delicate neck she wears her string of pearls and that little coin of gold. She is no more the same, she is no longer a girl then, and now a woman—and all my agony and all the marvel of the Change between! Over the end of the green table about which we sit, a spotless cloth is spread. It bears a pleasant lunch spread out with a simple elegance. Behind me is the liberal sunshine of the green and varnished garden. I see it all. I sit again there eating awkwardly, and Verrall talks of the Change.

"You can't imagine," he says in his sure, fine accents, "how the Change has destroyed me. I still don't feel awake. Most of my sort are so tremendously made; I never suspected it before."

He leans over the table toward me with an evident desire to make himself perfectly understood. "I find myself like some creature that is taken out of its shell—soft and new. I was trained to dress in a certain way, to behave in a certain way, to think in a certain way; I see now it's all wrong and narrow—most of it anyhow—a system of class shibboleths. We were decent to each other in order to be a gang to the rest of the world. Gentlemen indeed! But it's perplexing—"

I can hear his voice saying that now, and see the lift of his eyebrows and his pleasant smile.

He paused. He had wanted to say that, but it was not the thing we had to say.

I leaned forward a little and took hold of my glass very tightly. "You two," I said, "will marry?"

They looked at each other.

Nettie spoke very softly. "I did not mean to marry when I came away," she said.

"I know," I answered. I looked up with a sense of effort and met Verrall's eye.

He answered me. "I think we two have journeyed over there. But the thing that took us was a sort of madness."

I nodded. "All passion," I said, "is

madness." Then I fell into a doubting of those words.

"Why did we do those things?" he said, turning to her suddenly.

Her hands were clasped under her chin, her eyes downcast.

"The And so," she said, with her old trick of inadequate expression.

Then she seemed to open out suddenly.

"While," she cried with a sudden directness, with her eyes appealing to me, "I didn't mean to treat you badly—indeed I didn't. I kept thinking of you—and of father and mother, all the time. Only it didn't seem to move me. It didn't move me one bit from the way I had chosen."

"Chosen?" I said.

"Something seemed to have hold of me," she admitted. "It's all so uncomfortable."

She gave a little gesture of despair.

Verrall's fingers played on the cloth for a space. Then he turned his face to me again.

"Something—everything—said, 'Take her.' It was a raging desire—for her. Everything contributed to that—or counted for nothing. You—"

"Go on," said I.

"When I knew of you—"

I looked at Nettie. "You never told him about me?" I said, feeling, as it were, a sting out of the old time.

Verrall answered for her. "No. But things dropped, I saw you that night, my instincts were all awake. I knew it was you."

"Go on!" I said.

"Everything conspired to make it the finest thing in life. It had an air of generous recklessness. It meant mischief, it might mean failure in that life of politics and affairs, for which I was trained, which it was my honor to follow. That made it all the finer. It meant ruin or misery for Nettie. That made it all the finer. No man or decent man would have approved of what we did. That made it more splendid than ever. I had all the advantages of position and used them badly. That mattered not at all."

"Yes," I said, "it is true. And the same dark wave that lifted you, swept me on to follow with that resolve—and blubbery with hate. And the word to you, Nettie, what was it? 'Give?' 'Hurl yourself down the steep?'"

Nettie's hands fell upon the table. "I can't tell what it was," she said, speaking

here-beamed straight to me. "Girls aren't trained as men are to look into their minds. I can't see it yet. All sorts of mean little motives were there—over and above the 'must.' I kept thinking of his clothes!" She smiled, a flash of brightness, at Verrall. "I kept thinking of being like a lady and sitting in a hotel—with men like huffers waiting. It's the dreadful truth, Wilie. Things as mean as that! Things meaner than that!"

"It wasn't all mean," I said slowly, after a pause.

"No?" They spoke together.

"But a woman chooses more than a man does," Nettie added. "I saw it all in little bright pictures. Do you know—that jacket—there's something— You won't mind my telling you?"

I nodded, "No."

She spoke as if she spoke to my soul, very quietly and very earnestly, seeking to give the truth. "Something wrong in that cloth of yours," she said. "I know there's something hostile in being wrong round by things like that, but they did wrong me round. In the old time—to have coloured that! And I hated Clayton—and the grim of it. That kitchen! Your mother's dreadful kitchen! And besides, Wilie, I was afraid of you. I didn't understand you and I did him. It's different now—but then I knew what he meant. And there was his voice."

"Yes," I said to Verrall, making these disclosures quietly, "yes, Verrall, you have a good voice. Quot I never thought of that before!"

We sat silently for a time before our vivisectioned passions.

"Good?" I cried, "and there was our poor little top-bumper of intelligence on all these waves of instinct and senseless desire, those foaming things of touch and sight and feeling, like—like a coop of hen-washed overboard and churning under the sea?"

Verrall laughed approval of the image I had struck out. "A week ago," he said, trying it further, "we were clinging to our chicken coops and going with the heave and pour. That was just enough a week ago. But to-day——"

"To-day," I said, "the wind has fallen. The world-storm is over. And each chicken coop has changed by a miracle to a vessel that makes head against the sea."

IV

"What are we to do?" asked Verrall.

Nettie drew a deep-sorrowed curvature from the brow before us, and began very slowly and deliberately to turn down the seals of its calyx and remove, one by one, its petals. I remember that went on through all our talk. She put those rugged crimson streaks in a long row and adjusted them and readjusted them. When at last I was alone with these vestiges the pattern was still incomplete.

"Well," said I, "the matter seems fairly simple. You two—I swallowed it—I lose each other."

I paused. They answered me by silence, by a thoughtful silence.

"You belong to each other. I have thought it over and looked at it from many points of view. I happened to want—impossible things. I behaved badly. I had no right to pursue you." I turned to Verrall. "You hold yourself bound to her?"

He nodded assent.

"No social influence, no feeling out of all this generous clearness in the air—for that might happen—will change you back?"

He answered me with honest eyes meeting mine, "No, Lordford, no!"

"I did not know you," I said, "I thought of you as something very different from this."

"I was," he interpolated.

"Now," I said, "it is all changed."

Then I looked, for my thread had slipped away from me.

"As for me," I went on, and glanced at Nettie's downcast face, and then out forward with my eyes upon the flowers between us, "since I am swayed and shall be swayed by an affection for Nettie, since that affection is rich with the seeds of desire, since to see her young and wholly young is not to be endured by me—I must turn about and go from you; you must so bid me and I you. We must divide the world like Jacob and Esau. I must direct myself with all the will I have to other things. After all this passion is not life! It is perhaps for heaves and swaves, but for men—not. We must part and I must forget. What else is there but that?"

I did not look up, I sat very tense with the red petals pointing an indefinable memory to my brain, but I felt the ascent of Verrall's gaze. There were some moments of silence.

Then Nettie spoke. "But——" she said, and ceased.

I waited for a little while. I sighed and leaned back in my chair. "It is perfectly simple," I mused, "now that we have cool heads."

"But is it simple?" asked Nettie, and shushed my discourse out of being.

I looked up and found her with her eyes on Verrall. "You see," she said, "I like Willie. It's hard to say what one feels, but I don't want him to go away like this."

"But then," objected Verrall, "how——"

"No," said Nettie, and swept her half-unsprung carnation petals back into a heap of confusion. She began to arrange them very quickly into one long straight line.

"It's so difficult. For never before in all my life tried to get to the bottom of my mind. For one thing, I've not treated Willie properly. He—he counted on me. I know he did. I was his hope. I was a promised delight, something, something to crown life—better than anything he had ever had. And a secret pride. He lived upon me. I know—when we two began to meet together, you and I—it was a sort of treachery to him——"

"Treachery?" I said. "You were only taking your way through all these perplexities."

"You thought it treachery."

"I don't now."

"I did. In a sense I think so still. For you had need of me."

I made a slight protest at this doctrine and left thinking.

"And even when he was trying to kill us," she said to her lover, "I felt far from done in the bottom of my mind. I can understand all the horrible things, the humiliations—the humiliations he went through."

"Yes," I said, "but I don't see——"

"I don't see. I'm only trying to see. But you know, Willie, you are a part of my life. I have known you longer than I have known Edward. I know you better. Indeed I know you with all my heart. You think all your talk was thrown away upon me, that I never understood that side of you, or your ambitions or anything. I did—more than I thought at the time. Now—now it is all clear to me. What I had to understand in you was something deeper than Edward thought me. I have it now. You are a part of my life, and I don't want

to cut all that off from me now I have comprehended it, and throw it away."

"But you love Verrall."

"Love is such a queer thing! Is there one love? I mean, only one love?" She turned to Verrall. "I know I love you. I can speak out about that now, before this morning I couldn't have done so. It's just as though my mind had got out of a screened prison. But what is it, this love for you? It's a mass of flashes—things about you—ways you look, ways you have. It's the senses—the senses of certain beauties. It's flattery too—things you said, hopes and deceptions for myself. And all that had rolled up together and taken to itself the wild help of those deep emotions that shimmered in my body; it sensed everything. But it wasn't. How can I describe it! It was like having a very bright lamp with a thick shade; everything else in the room was hidden. But you take the shade off and there they are—it is the same light—still there! Only it lights everyone!"

Her voice ceased. For a while as one spoke, and Nettie, with a quick movement, swept the petals into the shape of a pyramid.

Figures of speech always distract me, and it ran through my mind like some puzzling relation, "It is still the same light."

"No woman believes these things," she asserted abruptly.

"What things?"

"No woman ever has believed them."

"You have to choose a man," said Verrall, approaching her before I did.

"We're brought up to that. We're told—it's in books, in statues, in the way people look, in the way they behave—one day there will come a man. He will be everything, no one else will be anything. Leave everything else; live in him."

"And a man, too, is taught that of some woman," said Verrall.

"Only men don't believe it; they have more obstinate minds. Men have never believed as though they believed it. One need not be old to know that. My nature they don't believe in. But a woman believes nothing by nature; she goes into a maid hiding her secret thoughts almost from herself."

"She used to," I said.

"You haven't," said Verrall, "anyhow."

"I've come out. It's that comes—and Willie. And because I never really believed in the maid at all—even if I thought I did.

It's stupid to send Willie off—chained, cast out, cover to see him again—when I like him as much as I do. It is cruel, it is wicked and ugly, to punish over him as if he was a defunct enemy, and pretend I'm going to be happy just the same. There's no sense in a rule of life that prescribes that. It's selfish, it's brutal, it's like something that has no sense. I——" There was a sob in her voice. "Willie! I won't!"

I sat lowering, staring with my eyes upon her quick fingers.

"It is brutal," I said at last, with a careful unemotional deliberation. "Nevertheless—it is the nature of things. And you see, after all, we are still half brutes, Nettie. And men, as you say, are more obstinate than women. The comet hasn't altered that; it's only made it clearer. We have come into being through a tumult of blind forces. I come back to what I said just now: we have found out poor reasonable minds, our wills to live well, ourselves, adrift on a wash of instincts, passions, instinctive prejudices, half-animal superstitions. Here we are like people clinging to something—like people smoldering upon a raft."

"We come back at last to my question," said Verrall softly. "What are we to do?"

"First," I said. "You see, Nettie, those bodies of ours are not the bodies of angels. I have read somewhere that in our bodies you can find evidence of the lowest anatomy; that about our inward ears—I think it is—and about our teeth, there remains still something of the fish, that there are bones that recall little—what is it?—mammoth forelimbs—and a hundred traces of the ape. Even your beautiful body, Nettie, carries this hint. No, keep me out!" I bowed forward earnestly. "Our emotions, our passions, our desires, the substance of them, like the substance of our bodies, is an animal, a competing, thing, as well as a desiring thing. You speak to us now, a mind to minds. One can do that when one has had exercise and when one has eaten, when one is not doing anything, but when one turns to live, one turns again to matter."

"Yes," said Nettie, slowly following me, "but you control it."

"Only through a measure of obedience. There is no magic in the business, to conquer matter, we must divide the enemy, and take matter as an ally. Nowadays it is indeed true that by faith a man can remove mountains. He can say to a mountain,

'Be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea'; but he does it because he helps and trusts his brother men, because he has the wit and patience and courage to win over to his side men, steel, obedience, dynamite, cranes, trucks, the money of other people. To conquer my desire for you, I must not perpetually thwart it by your presence; I must go away so that I may not see you, I must take up other interests, thrust myself into struggles and discussions——"

"And forget?" said Nettie.

"Not forget," I said, "but anyhow—cease to brood upon you."

She hung on that for some moments.

"No," she said, demolished her last pattern and looked up at Verrall as he stirred.

Verrall leaned forward on the table, elbows upon it, and the fingers of his two hands interlaced.

"You know," he said, "I haven't thought much of these things. At school and the university, one doesn't. It was part of the system to prevent it. They'll alter all that no doubt. We seem to be sharing about over questions that one came to at last in Greek—with valiant readings—in Plato, but which it never occurred to anyone to translate out of a dead language into living realities." He halted and answered some unspoken question from his own mind with,

"No. I think with Lesslie, Nettie, that, as he put it, it is in the nature of things for men to be exclusive. Minds are free things and go about the world, but only one man can possess a woman. You must choose yours. We are made for the struggle for existence—we use the struggle for existence; the things that live are the struggle for existence incarnate—and that works out that the men struggle for their mates; for each woman one prevails. The others go away."

"Like animals," said Nettie.

"Yes."

"There are many things in life," I said, "but that is the rough universal truth."

"But," said Nettie, "you don't struggle. That has been altered because men have minds."

"You choose," I said.

"If I don't choose to choose?"

"You have chosen."

She gave a little impatient "Oh! Why are women always the slaves of men? In this great age of Reason and Light that has come to alter nothing of that? And men too? I think it is all—stupid. I do not be-

Here this is the right solution of the thing, or anything but the bad habits of the time that was. Instant! You don't let your instincts rule you in a lot of other things. Here am I between you. Here is Edward. I—love him because he is gay and pleasant, and because—because I like him! Here is Willie—a part of me—my first secret, my oldest friend! Why may I not have both? Am I not a man that you must think of me as nothing but a woman—struggle me always as a thing to struggle for?" She paused; then she made her detached proposition to me. "Let us three keep together," she said. "Let us not part. To part is hate, Willie. Why should we not anyhow keep friends and meet and talk?" "Talk?" I said. "About this sort of thing?"

I looked across at Vernal and met his eyes, and we studied each other. It was the clean, straight scrutiny of honest antagonism. "No," I decided, "between us nothing of that sort can be."

"Ever?" said Nettie.

"Never," I said, concisely.

I made an effort within myself. "We cannot tamper with the law and customs of these things," I said; "these passions are too close to one's essential self. Better surgery than a lingering disease! From Nettie my love unto all. A man's love is not devotion, it is a demand, a challenge. And besides"—and here I forced my theme—"I have given myself now to a new mistress, and it is I, Nettie, who am unfaithful. Behind you and above you rises the coming City of the World, and I am in that building. Dear heart! you are only happiness—and that—that calls! If it is only that my blood shall choose the foundation stones—I could almost hope that should be my part, Nettie—I will join myself as that." I threw all the confusion I could into these words. "No conflict of passion," I added a little lamely, "must disturb me."

There was a pause.

"Then we must part," said Nettie, with the eyes of a woman one strikes in the face.

I nodded assent.

There was a little pause, and then we all stood up. We parted almost callously, with no more memorable words, and I was left presently in the arbor alone.

I do not think I watched them go. I only remember myself left there somehow—hor-

rify empty and alone. I sat down again and fell into a deep, shapeless musing.

## V

Suddenly I looked up. Nettie had come back and stood looking down at me.

"Since we talked I have been thinking," she said. "Edward has let me come to you alone. And I feel perhaps I can talk better to you alone."

I said nothing and that embarrassed her.

"I don't think we ought to part," she said. "No—I don't think we ought to part," she repeated. "Our lives is different ways. I wonder if you will understand what I am saying, Willie. It is hard to say what I feel, but I want it said. If we are to part forever I want it said—very plainly. Always before I have had the woman's instinct and the woman's training which makes one hide. But—Edward is not all of me. Think of what I am saying—Edward is not all of me. I wish I could tell you better how I see it. I am not all of myself. You, at any rate, are a part of me and I cannot bear to leave you. And I cannot see why I should leave you. There is a sort of blood link between us, Willie. We grew together. We are in each other's bones. I understand you. Now indeed I understand in some way I have come to an understanding at a stride. I understand you and your dream. I want to help you. Edward—Edward has no dreams. It is dreadful to me, Willie, to think we two are to part."

"But we have settled that—part we must."

"But why?"

"It is you."

"Well—why should I hide it, Willie?—I love you." Our eyes met. She flushed, she went on resolutely. "You are stupid. The whole thing is stupid. I love you both."

I said, "You do not understand what you say."

"You mean that I must go?"

"Yes, yes. Go!"

For a moment we looked at each other, mute, as though deep down in the unlikable darkness below the surface and present reality of things dumb meanings strove to be. She made to speak and desisted.

"But must I go?" she said at last, with quivering lips, and the tears in her eyes were stars. Then she began, "Willie—"

"Go!" I interrupted her. "Yes!"

Then again we were still.

She stood there, a fearful figure of pity, longing for me, pining me. Something of that water love that will carry our descendants at last out of all the limits, the hard, clear obligations of our personal life, moved me, like the first breath of a coming wind out of heaven that rises and passes away. I had an impulse to take her hand and kiss it, and then a trembling came to me, and I knew that if I touched her my strength would all pass from me.

And so, standing at a distance one from the other, we parted, and Nettie went, reluctant and looking back, with the men she had chosen to the lot she had chosen, out of my life—like the sunlight, out of my life.

## VI

I remember all that very distinctly to this day. I could almost vouch for the words I have put into our several mouths. Then comes a blank. I have a dim memory of being back in the house near the Links and the bustle of Melmont's departure, of finding Parker's energy dissipated, and of going away down the road with a strong desire to say good-by to Melmont alone.

Perhaps I was already doubting my decision to part forever from Nettie, for I think I had it in mind to tell him all that had been said and done.

I don't think I had a word with him or anything but a hurried hand-clasp. I am not sure; it has gone out of my mind. But I have a very clear and certain memory of my phase of bleak desolation as I watched his car rattle and clink and vanish over Mableborough Hill, and that I put there my first full and definite intimation that, after all, this great Change and my new wide vision in life were not to mean indifference to happiness for me. I had a sense of protest, as against extreme selfishness, as I saw him go. "It is too soon," I said to myself, "to leave me alone."

I felt I had sacrificed too much, that after I had said good-by to the hot immediate life of passion, to Nettie and desire, to physical and personal rivalry, to all that was most intensely myself, it was wrong to leave me alone and sore-hearted, to go on at once with these misty cold duties of the wider life. I felt nervous, and naked, and at a loss.

"Work!" I said with an effort at the house, and turned about with a sigh, and was glad that the way I had to go would at least take me to my mother.

But, curiously enough, I remember myself as being fairly cheerful in the town of Birmingham that night, and I recall an active and interested mood. I spent the night in Birmingham because the train service was disarranged, and I could not get on. I went to listen to a band that was playing its happy old-world music in the public park, and I fell into conversation with a man who said he had been a reporter upon one of the minor local papers. He was full and keen upon all the plans of reconstruction that were now shaping over the lives of humanity, and I know that something of that noble dream came back to me with his words and phrases. We walked up to a place called Fourmole by moonlight, and talked of the new social groupings that must replace the old isolated homes, and how the people would be housed.

This Fourmole was genuine to that matter. It had been an attempt on the part of a private firm of manufacturers to improve the housing of their workmen. To our minds in-day it would seem the feeblest of benevolent efforts, but at the time it was extraordinary and famous, and people came long journeys to see its trim cottages with bathes sunk under the kitchen floors (of all conceivable places), and other brilliant innovations. No one in that aggressive age seemed to see the danger to liberty that might arise through making working people tenants and debtors of their employer, though an act called the truck act had long ago intervened to prevent minor developments in the same direction. But I and my chance acquaintance that night seemed always to have been aware of that possibility, and we had no doubt in our minds of the public nature of the housing duty.

It was very interesting, but still a little cheerless, and when I lay in bed that night I thought of Nettie and the queer modifications of preference she had made, and among other things, and in a way, I prayed. I prayed that night to a Master Artificer, the unseen captain of all who go about the building of the world, the making of mankind. But before and after I prayed I imagined I was talking and reasoning and meeting again with Nettie. But she never came into the temple of that worshiping with me.

(To be continued.)



# In the Days of the Comet

BY H. G. WELLS

*(Illustrated by Henry Lewis.)*

## BOOK THE THIRD—THE NEW WORLD

### CHAPTER THE SECOND—MY MOTHER'S LAST DAYS

SUMMER. The previous fortnight had been a happy one in England just before the Great Change, when a huge comet is threatening to come in contact with the earth. In addition to heat, thirst and general discomfort with unusual social conditions, England has gone to the war with Germany. The warman, William Lancelotti, has become a scoundrel through the influence of his friend Farnell. This now leads to the breaking of Lancelotti's engagement to Nellie Weaver. The young man will leave for the gall and when she elopes with Edward Tivrell, the son of her father's employer, he follows the couple to a room on the boat coast. Here he attempts to kill the lovers with his revolver. But the shot goes wild, and just then the earth, meeting with the comet's path, is enveloped in a gas which renders every living being unconscious. This again lasts a few hours. Humanity then awakes in a changed world. Men find that they have new aims, new children, new desires. They begin to reconsider the world as a fashion dictated by the principles of human brotherhood. Lancelotti sees that he must give Nellie up to Tivrell, and does so.

#### I



ON that day I came home to Clayton.

The new strange brightness of the world was all the brighter there for the host of dark disconsolable memories of darkened childhood, half-grown youth, embittered adolescence, that were about the place for me. It seemed to me that I saw morning there for the first time. No chimneys smoked that day, no furnaces were burning; the people were busy with other things. The clear strong sun, the sparkle on the dustless air, made a strange gaiety in the narrow streets. I passed a number of weeping people coming home from the public breakfasts that were given in the town hall until better things could be arranged, and happened on Mr. Ingham among them. "You were right about that comet," I sang out at the sight of him, and he came toward me and dropped my hand.

"What are people doing here?" said I.

"They're sending us food from outside," he said, "and we're going to level all these slums—and shift into towns on the moors"; and he began to tell me of many things that were being arranged, the Midland land

commission had got to work with remarkable celerity and directness of purpose, and the redistribution of population was already planned in its broad outlines. He was working at an improvised college of engineering. Until schemes of work were made out, almost everyone was going to school again to get as much technical training as possible against the demands of the huge enterprise of reconstruction that was now beginning.

He walked with me to my door, and there I met old Pettigrew coming down the steps. He looked dusty and tired, but his eye was brighter than it used to be, and he carried in a rather unaccustomed manner a workman's tool basket.

"How's the reconstruction, Mr. Pettigrew?" I asked.

"Diet," said old Pettigrew, "less work, less work." He looked me in the eye. "These houses," he said, "will have to come down, I suppose, and our notions of property must undergo very considerable revision in the light of reason; but mean while I've been doing something to patch that degenerate soul of mine. To think that I could have dodged and cringed!"

He raised a deprecatory hand, drew down the loose corners of his ample mouth, and shook his old head.

"The past is past, Mr. Pettigrew."

"Your poor dear mother! So good and

honest a woman! So simple and kind and forgiving! To think of it! My dear young man!—he said it manfully—"I'm ashamed!"

"The whole world blushed at dawn the other day, Mr. Pettigrew," I said, "and did it very justly. That's our new, God knows. Who is not ashamed of all that came before last Tuesday?"

I held out a forgiving hand, natively forgetful that in this place I was a thief, and he took it and went his way, shaking his head and repeating he was ashamed, but I think a little comforted.

The door opened and my poor old mother's face, markedly cleared, appeared. "Ah, Willie, boy! Fast! Fast!"

I ran up the steps to her, for I feared she might fall.

How she clung to me in the passage, the dear woman! But first she shut the front door. The old habit of respect for me, unaccountable temper still waxed hot. "Ah, dear!" she said, "ah, dear! But you were surely tried," and kept her face close to my shoulder, lest she should offend me by the sight of the tears that were in her eyes.

She made a sort of gulping noise and was quiet for a while, holding me very tightly to her heart with her worn, long hands.

She thanked me privately for my telegram, and I put my arm about her and drew her into the living-room.

"It's all well with me, mother dear," I said, "and the dark times are over—*as* done with forever, mother."

Whereupon she had courage and gave way and sobbed aloud, none chiding her. She had not let me know she could still weep for her young years.

## II

Dear heart! there remained for her but a very brief while in this world that had been reserved. I did not know how short that time would be, but the little I could do—perhaps after all it was not little to her—to atone for the harshness of my days of wrath and rebellion, I did. I took care to be constantly with her, for I perceived now her curious need of me. It was not that we had stress in exchange or pleasure to share, but she liked to see me at table, to watch me working, to have me go to and fro. There was no toll for her any more in the world, but only such light services as are easy and

pleasant for a worn and weary old woman to do, and I think she was happy even at her end.

She kept to her queer old eighteenth-century version of religion, too, without a change. She had more this particular article so long it was a part of her. Yet the Change was evident even in that persistence. I said to her one day, "But do you still believe in that talk of fate, dear mother? You—with your tender heart?"

She vowed she did. Some theological intricacy made it necessary to her, but still—

She looked thoughtfully at a bank of primulas before her for a time, and then laid her tremulous hand imperiously on my arm. "You know, Willie dear," she said, as though she was clearing up a childish misunderstanding of mine, "I don't think anyone will go there. I never *did* think that."

## III

That talk stands out in my memory because of that agreeable theological decision of hers, but it was only one of a great number of talks. It used to be pleasant in the afternoon, after the day's work was done and before one went on with the evening's study—how odd it would have seemed in the old time for a young man of the industrial class to be doing post-graduate work in sociology, and how much a matter of course it seems now!—to walk out into the gardens of Lovelocker House, and smoke a cigarette or so and let her talk ramblingly of the things that interested her. Physically the Great Change did not do so very much to vivacious her—she had lived in that dismal underground kitchen in Clayton too long for any material rejuvenescence. She glowed out indeed as a dying spark among the ashes might glow under a draught of fresh air—and actually it hastened her end. But those closing days were very tranquil, full of an effortless contentment. With her, life was like a rainy, windy day that clears only to show the sunset after-glow—the light has passed. She secured no new fishes amid the comforts of the new life, did no new things, but only found a happier light upon the old.

She lived with a number of other old ladies belonging to our commune in the upper rooms of Lovelocker House. Those upper apartments were simple and ample, fair and well done in the Georgian style,

and they had been organized to give the maximum of comfort and convenience and to accommodate the need of skilled attendance. We had taken over the various "great houses," as they used to be called, to make communal dining-rooms—these kitchens were conventionally large—and pleasant places for the old people of over sixty whose time of ease had come, and for similar public uses. We had done this not only with Lord Redour's house, but also with Charlton House—where old Mrs. Verrall made a dignified and capable hostess—and indeed with most of the fine residences in the beautiful wide country between the Four Towns district and the Welsh mountains. About these great houses there had usually been good out-buildings, handières, married-servants' quarters, stabling, dairies, and the like, suitably masked by trees. We turned these into homes, and to them we added fine tennis and wood chalets and afterwards quadrangular residential buildings. In order to be near my mother I had two small rooms in the new collegiate buildings which our commune was almost the last to possess, and they were very convenient for the station of the high-speed electric railway that took me down to our daily conferences and my secretarial and statistical work in Clifton.

Once had been one of the first modern communes to get in order, we were greatly helped by the energy of Lord Redour, who had a fine feeling for the picturesque associations of his ancestral home—the detour that took our line through the beeches and hawthorn and bluebells of the West Wood and saved the pleasant open wilderness of the park was one of his suggestions—and we had many reasons to be proud of our surroundings. Nearly all the other communes that sprung up all over the pleasant park-lands round the industrial valley of the Four Towns, as the workers moved out, came to us to study the architecture of the residential squares and quadrangles with which we had replaced the back streets between the great houses and the recreational residences about the cathedral, and the way in which we had adapted all these buildings to our new social needs. Some claimed to have improved on us. But they could not emulate the rhododendron garden out beyond our shrubberies; that was a thing altogether out even in our part of England, because of its exposure and of the rarity of good peat free from lime.

These gardens had been planned under the third Lord Redour, fifty years ago and more; they abounded in rhododendrons and azaleas, and were in places so well sheltered and sunny that great magnolias flourished and flowered. There were tall trees smothered in clematis and yellow climbing roses, and an endless variety of flowering shrubs and fine canebars, and such pompas grass as no other garden could show. And barred by the broad shadows of these, were glades and broad spaces of emerald turf, and here and there banks of pugged moss and flower beds, and lawns given over, some to spring bulbs, and some to primroses and primulas and polyanthes. My mother loved these latter banks and the little round staring eyes of their innumerable pinks, reds, browns, and purple corollas, more than anything else the gardens could show, and in the spring of the Year of Breifidling she would go with me day after day to the seat that showed them in the greatest multitude.

It gave her, I think, among other agreeable impressions, a sense of gentle exultation. In the old time she had never known what it was to have more than enough of anything agreeable in the world at all.

We would sit and think, or talk—there was a curious effect of complete understanding between us whether we talked or were still.

"Heaven," she said to me one day, "heaven is a garden."

I was moved to tease her a little. "There's jewels, you know, walls and gates of jewels—and singing."

"For such as like them," said my mother firmly, and thought for a while. "There'll be things for all of us, of course. But for me it couldn't be heaven, dear, unless it was a garden—a nice sunny garden. And feeling such as we're fond of are close and handy by."

You of your happier generation cannot realize the wonderfulness of those early days in the new epoch, the sense of security, the extraordinary effects of contrast. In the morning, except in high summer, I was up before dawn, and breakfasted upon the soft, smooth train, and perhaps saw the sunrise as I rushed out of the little tunnel that pierced Clifton Crest, and so to work like a man. Now that we had got all the houses and schools and all the softness of life away from our road and iron ore and clay, now that a thousand obstructive "rights"

and timbales had been swept aside, we could let ourselves go. So we merged this enterprise with that, cut across this or that anciently obstructive piece of private land, joined and separated, effected gigantic consolidations and gigantic economies, and the valley, no longer a pit of equalled human tragedies and mutually conflicting industries, grew into a sort of beauty of its own, a savage inhuman beauty of force and machinery and flames. One was a Titan in that Era. Then back one came at midday to bathe and change in the trees, and so to the leisurely gossiping lunch in the club dining-room in Leicester House, and the refreshment of these green and sunlit afternoon tranquillities.

Sometimes in her prelude moments my mother doubted whether all this last phase of her life was not a dream.

"A dream," I used to say, "a dream indeed—but a dream that is one step nearer awakening than that nightmare of the former days."

She found great comfort and assurance in my altered clothes—she liked the new fashion of dress, she alleged. It was not simply altered clothes. I did grow two inches, broaden some inches round my chest, and increase in weight three stones, before I was twenty-three. I wore a well known cloth and she would correct me, derive and admire it, greatly—she had the woman's sense of texture very strong in her.

Sometimes she would muse upon the past, rubbing together her poor rough hands—they never got softened. She told me much I had not heard before about my father, and her own early life. It was like finding that old faded flowers in a book still faintly sweet, to realize that once my mother had been loved with passion, that my remote father had once shed hot tears of tenderness in her arms. And she would sometimes even speak sensitively of Nettie, in those narrow, old-world phrases that her lips could rub off all their bitter narrowness.

"She wasn't worthy of you, dear," she would say thoughtfully, leaving me to guess the person she intended.

"No man is worthy of a woman's love," I answered. "No woman is worthy of a man's." I loved her, dear mother, and that you cannot deny."

"There's others," she would muse.

"Not for me," I said. "No! I didn't fire a shot that time, I learned my magazine. I

can't begin again, mother, not from the beginning!"

She sighed and said no more then.

At another time she said—I think her words were, "You'll be lonely when I'm gone, dear!"

"You'll not think of going, then," I said.

"Eh, dear! but man and maid should come together."

I said nothing to that.

"You brood overmuch on Nettie, dear. If I could see you married to some sweet girl of a woman, some good, kind girl—"

"Dear mother, I'm married enough. Perhaps some day— Who knows? I can wait."

"But to have nothing to do with a woman!"

"I have my friends. Don't you worry, mother. There's plentiful work for a man in this world though the heart of love is cast out from him. Nettie was life and beauty for me—in—will be. Don't think I've lost too much, mother."

(Because in my heart I told myself the end had still to come.)

And once she sprung a question on me suddenly that surprised me.

"What are they now?" she asked.

"What?"

"Nettie and—Wm."

She had passed to the marrow of my thought. "I don't know," I said shortly.

Her shrilled hand just fluttered into touch of mine.

"It's better so," she said, as if glad, big, "indeed it is better so." There was something in her quivering old voice that for a moment took me back across an epoch to the protests of the former time, to those moments of submission, those appearances to offend in, that had always stirred an angry spirit of rebellion within me.

"That is the thing I doubt," I said, and straightly I felt I could talk no more to her of Nettie. I got up and walked away from her, and came back after a while, to speak of other things, with a bunch of daffodils for her in my hand.

But I did not always spend my afternoons with her. There were days when one craved hunger for Nettie rose again, and then I had to be alone; I walked, or bicycled, and presently I found a new interest and relief in leaning to ride. For the home was already very softly resuming the benefit of the Change. Hardly anywhere was the inhumanity of horse-traction to be

found after the first year of the new epoch; everywhere lagging and dragging, and scrounging was done by machines, and the horse had become a beautiful instrument for the pleasure and carriage of youth. I rode both in the saddle and, what is finer, naked and barebacked. I found violent exercises were good for the state of enormous melancholy that came upon me, and when at last horse-racing pulled, I went and joined the station who practiced wearing upon streptophan beyond Humberland Hill. But at least every alternate day I spent with my mother, and altogether I think I gave her two-thirds of my afternoons.

#### IV

When presently that drowsy, that fading weakness that made a wilderness for so many of the older people in the beginning of the new time, took hold upon my mother, there came Anna Ravi as to daughter her—after our new custom. She chose to come. She was already known to us a little from chance meetings and chance services she had done my mother in the garden. She seemed then just one of those plainly good girls the world at its worst has never failed to produce, who were in the dark old times the hidden antithesis of all our breeding, fading, fruitless lives. They made their secret voiceless worship, they did their needful, unrequited, unshaken, unceasing work as helpful daughters, as nurses, as faithful servants, as the humble providences of homes. She was almost exactly three years older than I. At first I found no beauty in her; she was short, but rather sturdily and ruddy, with red-fringed hair, and fair hairy brows and red-brown eyes. But her thickened hair I found were full of help, her voice carried good cheer.

At first she was no more than a blue-clad, white-aproned benevolence that moved in the shadows behind the bed on which my old mother lay and winked reverently to death. She would come forward to anticipate some little need, to proffer some simple comfort, and always then my mother smiled on her. In a little while I discovered the beauty of that helpful gaze of her woman's body, I discovered the grace of smiling goodness, the sweetness of a tender pity, and the great riches of her voice, of her few reassuring words and phrases. I noted and remembered very clearly how once my mother's

lean old hand patted the first gold-flecked strength of hair, as it went by upon its duties with the coverlet.

"She is a good girl to me," said my mother one day—"a good girl. Like a daughter should be. I never had a daughter—really." She mused peacefully for a space. "Your little sister died," she said.

I had never heard of that little sister.

"November the tenth," said my mother. "Twenty-nine months and three days. I cried—cried. That was before you came, dear. So long ago—and I can see it now. I was a young wife then, and your father was very kind. But I can see its hands, my dear little quiet hands. Dear, they say that now—now they will not let the little children die."

"No, dear mother," I said, "we shall do better now."

"The club doctor could not come. Your father went twice. There was some one else, some one who paid. So your father went on into Southampton, and that man wouldn't come unless he had his fee. And your father had changed his clothes to look more respectful and he hadn't any money, not even his train fare home. It seemed cruel to be waiting there with my baby thing in pain. And I can't help thinking perhaps we might have saved her. But it was like that with the poor always in the bad old times—always. When the doctor came at last he was angry. 'Why wasn't I called before?' he said, and he took no pains. He was angry because some one hadn't explained. I begged him—but it was too late."

She said those things very quietly with drooping eyelids, like one who describes a dream. "We are going to manage all those things better now," I said, feeling a strange resentment at this painful little story her faded, mother-of-lark voice was telling me.

"She talked," my mother went on—"she talked for her age wonderfully. Hippopotamus."

"Is?" I said.

"Hippopotamus, dear—quite plainly one day, when her father was showing her pictures. And her little prayers. 'Now I lay me down to sleep.' I made her little socks. Knitted they was, dear, and the best most difficult."

Her eyes were closed now. She spoke no longer to me, but to herself. She whispered other vague things, little sentences, ghosts



THE WORLD GOES WITH ME DAY AFTER DAY TO THE GARDEN THAT BOWERS THE FLOWERS  
IN THE GREATEST MULTITUDE

of long dead moments. Her words grew less distinct.

Presently she was asleep and I got up and went out of the room, but my mind was queerly obsessed by the thought of that little life that had been glad and hopeful only to pass so irresistibly out of hope again into necessity, this sister of whom I had never heard before.

And presently I was in a black rage at all the irreconcilable sorrows of the past, of that great ocean of avoidable suffering of which this was but one luminous and quivering red drop. I walked in the garden and the garden was too small for me; I went out to wander on the moors. "The past is past," I cried, and all the while across the gulf of five and twenty years I could hear my poor mother's heart wring weeping for that baby daughter who had suffered and died. Indeed that old spirit of rebellion has not altogether died in me, for all the transfer-

ration of the new life. I quieted down at last to a thin and austere comfort in thinking that the whole is not told to us, that it cannot perhaps be told to such minds as mine, and what was for mere sustenance, that now we have strength and courage and this new gift of wise love, whatever cruel and sad things marred the past, none of these sorrowful things that made the very warp and woof of the old life, need now go on happening. We could foresee, we could prevent and save. "The past is past," I said, between sighing and resolve, as I came into view again on my homeward way of the hundred sunset-lit windows of old Lancaster House. "Those sorrows are someone's no more."

But I could not altogether shut that common sadness of the new time, that memory and inevitable rubble of the countless lives that had stumbled and failed in pain and darkness before our air grew clear.

#### CHAPTER THE THIRD—RELIGION AND NEW YEAR'S EVE

##### I

**I**N the end my mother died rather suddenly, and her death came as a shock to me. Diagnosis was still very inadequate at that time. The doctors were, of course, fully alive to the incredible defects of their common training and were doing all they could to supply its deficiencies, but they were still extraordinarily ignorant. Some unaccountably observed factor of her illness came into play with her, and she became feverish and weak and died very quickly. I do not know what remedial measures were attempted; I hardly know what was happening until the whole thing was over.

At that time my attention was much engaged by the stir of the great Beltane festival that was held on May Day in the Year of Scuffling. It was the first of those great rubbish burnings that opened the new year. Young people nowadays can scarcely hope to imagine the enormous quantities of pure litter and useless accumulation with which we had to deal. Had we not yet made a special day and season, the whole world would have been an incessant reek of waste

filth, and it was, I think, a happy idea to revive this ancient festival of the May and November fires. It was inevitable that the old idea of purification should revive with the season; it was felt to be a burning of other than material belongings. Innumerable quasi-spiritual things—dreams, documents, debts, vindictive records—went up on those great fires. People passed praying between the fires, and it was a fine symbol of the new and wider tolerance that had come to men, but those who still found their comfort in the orthodox faith came better equipped to pray that all hate might be burned out of their professions. For even in the fires of Babel, now that men have done with love hatred, one may find the living God.

Endless were the things we had to destroy in those great purgings. First, there were nearly all the houses and buildings of the old time. In the end we did not save in England one building in five thousand that was standing when the career came. Year by year, as we made our homes afresh in accordance with the near needs of our new social habits, we swept away more and more of those hostile structures, the ancient residential houses—hazels built, with out imaginations, without beauty, without common honesty, without even comfort or

IT WAS THE FIRST OF THE TEN GREAT NOBILITARIAN BURNINGS THAT OPENED THE NEW AGE.





convenience—in which the early twentieth century had been dedicated. We saved nothing but what was beautiful or interesting out of all their grand and melancholy abundance. The actual houses, of course, we could not drag to our feet, but we brought all their shuffling dead down, their dreadful window sashes, their servant-to-morose-staircases, their dark, dark capacious, the verminous papers from their waly walls, their dust- and dirt-sodden carpets, their ill-designed and yet pretentious tables and chairs, sideboards and chest-of-drawers, the old dirt-saturated books, their ornaments—their dirty, decayed, and altogether perfunctory ornaments, under which I remember there were sometimes even stashed dead birds—we buried them all. The paint-plastered woodwork, with coat above coat of rusty paint—that is particular biased lively. I have already tried to give you an impression of old-world furniture, of Purdon's bedroom, my mother's room, Mr. Gabbins's sitting-room, but, thank Heaven! there is nothing in life now to convey the peculiar dogness of it all. For one thing, there is no more imperfect combination of coal going on everywhere, and no roadways like grassless, open scars along the earth from which dust pours out perpetually. We burned and destroyed most of our private buildings and all the woodwork, all our furniture—except a few score thousand pieces of distinct and intrinsic beauty, from which our present forms have developed—nearly all our hangings and carpets, and also we destroyed almost every scrap of old-world clothing. Only a few carefully disinfected types and vestiges of that remain now in our museums.

One writes now with a peculiar horror of the dress of the old world. The men's clothes were worn without any cleansing process at all, except an occasional superficial brushing, for periods of a year or so; they were made of dark, obscuring mottled patterns to conceal the stage of deterioration they had reached, and they were of a fitted and porous texture admirably calculated to accumulate driving matter. Many women wore coats of similar substances, and of so long and cumbersome a form that they inevitably trailed among all the rheumatisms of our horse-frequented roads. It was our habit in England that the whole of our population was booted—their feet were for

the most part ugly enough to need it—but it becomes now inconceivable how they could have imprisoned their feet in the amazing cases of leather and imitations of leather they used. I have heard it said that a large part of the physical decline that was apparent in our people during the closing years of the nineteenth century, though no doubt due in part to the miscellaneous badness of the food they ate, was in the main attributable to the viciousness of the common footwear. They shirked open-air exercise altogether, because their boots were cut so snugly and pinched and hurt them if they took it. I have mentioned, I think, the part my own boots played in the squallid drama of my adolescence. I had a sense of unholy triumph over a hidden enemy when at last I found myself steering truck after truck of cheap boots and shoes (scraped stock from Southwicks) to the run-off by the top of the Glenville Street turnpike.

Most of our public buildings we destroyed and burned; we reshaped our plan of habitation. Our theater sheds, our banks and inconvenient business houses, our factories (these in the first year of all), and all the "unmeaning repetition" of silly little sham Gothic churches and meetinghouses, mean-looking shells of stone and mortar without love, invention, or any beauty at all in them, that men had thrust into the face of their created God, even so they thrust cheap food into the mouths of their created workers—all these we also swept away in the course of that first decade. Then we had the whole of the superadded steam-railway system to scrap and get rid of, stations, signals, fences, rolling-stock—a plant of ill-planned, smoke-distributing nuisance apparatus that would, under former conditions, have maintained an offensive, disgusting, obstructive life for perhaps half a century. Then also there was a great harvest of lemons, rotten boards, boardings, ugly sheds. All the corrugated iron in the world and everything that was smeared with tar, our gas works and petroleum stores, our horse vehicles and vans and kornes—all had to be crushed. But I have said enough now perhaps to give some idea of the bulk and quality of our great bonfire, our burnings up, our meltings down, our toll of their wreckage, near and above the constructive effort, in those early years.

(To be concluded.)

# In the Days of the Comet

By H. C. WELLS

*Illustrated by Elmer Isen*

## BOOK THE THIRD—THE NEW WORLD

### CHAPTER THE THIRD—BEHIND AND NEW YEAR'S EVE—(CONTINUED)

**SYNOPSIS:** The previous instalments deal with happenings in England just before the Great Change, when a huge comet is threatening to come in contact with the earth. In response to hard times and general discontent with existing social conditions, England has gone to war with Germany. The narrator, William Lancelotti, has become a socialist through the influence of his friend Farford. This move leads to the breaking of Lancelotti's engagement to Selma Stuart. The young man still loves the girl, and when she drops with Edward Verrell, the son of her father's employer, he follows the couple to a resort on the East coast. Here he attempts to tell the lovers what his resolve is. But the stars go wild, and just then the earth, passing into the comet's path, is enveloped in a gas which renders every living being unconscious. This state lasts a few hours. Humanity then awakes to a changed world. Men find that they have new aims, new ambitions, new desires. They begin to reconstruct the world in a fashion dictated by the principles of human brotherhood. Lancelotti sees that he must give Verrell up to Verrell, and does so. He returns to his home in Chelsea and finds his mother in fading health. Anna Barrett comes to take care of her and the young man finds himself much attracted to the girl. Meanwhile the regeneration of the world goes steadily on. People are freed from everything that is ugly or useless or dull. Great outdoor stadiums accompany gigantic musical and athletic efforts. These buildings are adorned as festivals. In the huge bedrooms are provided all the conveniences and apparatus of houses, hangings, carpets, and clothing. Everything that tends to mar the beauty of nature is destroyed as well.

#### II



UT there were but the coarse material bones of the planet's form of the world. These were but the outward and visible signs of the innumerable crimes, rights, passions, desires, life, death, and characters that were cast upon the form: a vast accumulation of enigmas and unknowns, rather curious enough, but beautiful enough to preserve, went to swell the blast, and all (saving a few truly glorious trophies and mementoes) of our symbols, our apparatus and material of war. Then innumerable triumphs of our old, bastard, half-commercial line arts were promptly condemned, great oil paintings, done to please the half-educated middle class, glazed for a moment and were gone. Academy murals crumbled to useful lime; a great multitude of silly statues and decorative carvings, and hangings, and embroideries, and bad music and musical instruments, shared this fate. And books, countless books, and tales of

newspapers went also to these pyres. From the private houses in Southampton alone—which I had deemed, perhaps not unjustly, altogether dilettante—we gathered a whole dust-cart full of cheap illustrated editions of the minor English classics—for the most part very dull stuff indeed and still dear—and about a truck-load of flannel and discoloured penny fiction, hats, waders, stuff, the droop of our nation's mind. And it seemed to me that when we gathered these books and papers together we gathered together something more than print and paper; we gathered scraped and scraped ideas and contagious love suggestions, the formulas of dull tolerances and stupid insouciance, the mean devious ingenuities of sluggish habits of thinking and timid and indolent reaction. There was more than a touch of malignant satisfaction for us in helping gather it all together.

I was so busy, I say, with my share in this detestable work that I did not notice, as I should otherwise have done, the little indications of change in my mother's state. Indeed I thought her a little stronger, she was slightly flushed, slightly more talkative

On Beltane Eve, our Lowerchester rummage being finished, I went along the valley to the far end of Southwington to help sort the stack of the detached group of jost-barks there—their chief output had been mastal ornaments in imitation of marble, and there was very little selling, I found, to be done—and there it was near Anna found me at last by telephone, and told me my mother had died in the morning suddenly and very shortly after my departure.

For a while I did not seem to believe it; this obviously inevitable event stunned me when it came as though I had never had an anticipatory moment. For a while I went on working, and then almost apathetically, in a mood of half-reluctant curiosity, I started for Lowerchester.

When I got there the last offices were over, and I was shown my old mother's peaceful white face, very still, but a little cold and stern to me, a little unfamiliar, lying among white flowers.

I went in alone to her, into that quiet room, and stood for a long time by her bedside. I sat down then and thought. Then at last, strangely hushed, and with the drops of my loneliness opening beneath me, I came out of that room and down into the world again, a bright-eyed, active world, very noisy, happy, and busy with its last preparations for the mighty creation of past and superseded things.

### III

I remember that first Beltane festival as the most terribly lonely night in my life. It stands in my mind in fragments, fragments of intense feeling with forgotten gaps between.

I recall very distinctly being upon the great staircase of Lowerchester House (though I don't remember getting there from the room in which my mother lay), and how upon the landing I met Anna ascending as I came down. She had but just heard of my return, and she was hurrying upstairs to me. She stopped and so did I, and we stood and clasped hands, and she scrutinized my face in the way women sometimes do. So we remained for a second or so. I could say nothing to her at all, but I could feel the wave of her emotion. I talked, unawares the nearest pressure of her hand, relinquished it, and after a queer second of hesitation went on down, returning to my own

preoccupations. It did not occur to me at all then to ask myself what she might be thinking or feeling.

I remember the overhead fall of mellow evening light, and how I went mechanically some paces toward the dining-room. Then at the sight of the little tables, and a gusty outburst of talking voices as some one at front of me swung the door open and so, I remembered that I did not want to eat. After that comes an impression of myself walking across the open grass in front of the house, and the purpose I had of getting alone upon the moors, and how somebody passing me said something about a hat. I had come out without my hat.

A fragment of thought has linked itself with an effect of long shades upon turf golden with the light of the sinking sun. The world was singularly empty, I thought, without either Nettie or my mother. There wasn't any sense in it any more. Nettie was already back in my mind then. Then I am out on the moors. I avoided the cross-where the bonfires were being piled, and sought the lonely places.

I remember very clearly sitting near a gate beyond the park, in a field just below the cross that hid the Beacon Hill bonfire and its crowd, and I was looking at and admiring the sunset. The golden earth and sky seemed like a little bubble that floated in the gloam of human fading. Then in the twilight I walked along an unknown, hat-banned road between high hedges.

I did not sleep under a roof that night; but I hungered and ate. I ate near midnight at a little inn over toward Birmingham, and miles away from my home. Instinctively I had avoided the cross where the bonfire-crowds gathered, but here there were many people, and I had to share a table with a man who had some useless mortgage deeds to burn. I talked to him about them—but my soul stood at a great distance behind my lips.

Soon such Millop have a little tulip-shaped flame-flower. Little black figures clustered round and dotted the base of its petals, and as for the rest of the maintrades showed, the kindly night unfolded them up. By leaving the roads and clear paths and wandering in the fields I managed to keep alone, though the confused noise of voices and the roaring and creaking of great fires was always near me.

I wandered into a lonely meadow, and



SHE STEPPED OUT OF THE DREAM I HAD MADE OF HER. A THING OF BEES AND  
BONNETS AND JEWAN KINGS IDEAS

presently, in a hollow of deep shadows, I lay down to stare at the stars. I lay hidden in the darkness, and ever and again the sough and upsurge of the Beltane fire that were burning up the very fells of a vanished age, and the clanking of the people passing through the fens and praying to be delivered from the prison of themselves, reached my ears. And I thought of my mother, and then of my new loneliness and the hunger of my heart for Nettie.

I thought of many things that night, but chiefly of the overflowing personal love and tenderness that had come to me in the wake of the Change, of the greater need, the unsatisfied need in which I stood, for this one person who could fulfill all my dreams. So long as my mother had lived she had in a measure held my heart, given me a food these emotions could live upon, and alligating that emptiness of spirit, but now suddenly that one possible comfort had left me. There had been many at the season of the Change who had thought that this great enlargement of mankind would abolish personal love; but it had only made it fierer, fuller, more richly necessary. They had thought that since men now were all full of the joyful passion to make and do, and glad and loving and of willing service to all their fellows, there would be no need of the one intimate trusting communion that had been the finest thing of the former life. And indeed, so far as this was a matter of advantage in the struggle for existence, they were right. But so far as it was a matter of the spirit and the fine perceptions of life, it was altogether wrong.

We had indeed not eliminated personal love, we had but stripped it of its base wrappings, of its pride, its suspicion, its uncertainty and competitive elements, until at last it stood up in our minds stark, thinking, and inviolable. Through all the fine, diversifying ways of the new life there were for everyone certain persons, mysteriously and indelibly in the key of oneself, whose mere presence gave pleasure, whose mere existence was interest, whose idiosyncrasy blended with accident to make a complete and predominant harmony for their predestined loves. They were the essential thing in life. Without them the fair brave show of the rejuvenated world was a caparisoned steed without a rider, a bowl without a flower, a theater without a play. And to me that night of Beltane it was as clear as

white flames that Nettie, and Nettie alone, roused those harmonies in me. And she had gone! I had sent her from me! I knew not whether she had gone. I had in my first vicious foolishness cut her out of my life forever.

So I saw it then, and I lay unseen in the darkness and called upon Nettie, and wept for her, lay upon my face and wept for her, while the glad people went to and fro, and the smoke streamed thick across the distant stars, and the red reflections, the shadows and the flustering gleams, danced over the face of the world.

Not the Change had freed us from our lower passions indeed, from balinal and mechanical consciousness and mean aims and coarse imaginings, but from the passions of love it had not freed us. It had but brought Eros, the lord of life, to his own. All through the long sorrow of that night I, who had rejected him, confessed his way, with tears and inexpressible regrets.

I cannot give the remotest guess of when I rose up, nor of my tortuous wanderings in the valleys between the midnight fires, nor how I reached the laughing and jeering multitudes who went streaming home between three and four, to resume their loves, swept and garished, stripped and clean. But at dawn, when the notes of the world's gladness were ready to glow—it was a bleak dawn that made me shiver in my thin summer clothes—I came across a field to a little copse full of dam-blue hyacinths. A queer sense of familiarity arrested my steps, and I stood puzzled. Then I moved to step a dozen paces from the path, and at once a singularly misshapen tree hitched itself man a notch in my memory. This was the place! Here I had stood, there I had placed my old kite, and shot with my revolver, learning to use it against the day when I should encounter Varrall.

Kite and revolver had gone now, and all my hot and narrow past, its last outposts had shriveled and vanished in the whirling gusts of the Beltane fire. So I walked through a world of gray ashes at last, back to the great house in which the dead, deserted image of my dear lost mother lay.

#### IV

I came back to Lowchester House very tired, very watched, and exhausted by my fearless longing for Nettie. I had no thought of what lay before me.



THE SPLENDED NEGGER PROSPECT OF THAT BERGSLAND CITY WAS BEFORE ME. THERE FOR ONE CLEAR MOMENT I SAW IN ITS GALLERIES AND OPEN SPACES, ITS TREASURES OF GOLDEN FRUIT AND CRYSTAL WATERS.

A miserable attraction drew me into the great house to look again on the stillness that had been my mother's face, and as I came into that room, Anna, who had been sitting by the open window, rose to meet me. She had the air of one who waits—She, too, was pale with watching; all night she had watched between the dead within and the Bellare firm abroad, and longed for my coming. I stood mute between her and the bedside.

"Willie," she whispered, and eyes and body seemed incarnate pity.

An unseen presence drew us together. My mother's face became radiant, commanding. I turned to Anna as a child might turn to its nurse. I put my hands about her strong shoulders, she looked me to her, and my heart gave way. I buried my face in her breast and clung to her wildly, and burst into a passion of weeping.

She held me with hungry arms. She whispered to me, "There, there!" as one whispers comfort to a child. Suddenly she was kissing me. She kissed me with a hungry intensity of passion, on my cheeks, on my lips. She kissed me on my lips with lips that were sick with tears. And I returned her kisses.

Then abruptly we desisted and stood apart—looking at each other.

### V

It seems to me as if the intense memory of Nettie vanished utterly out of my mind at the touch of Anna's lips. I loved Anna.

We went to the council of our family—constantly it was then called—and she was given me in marriage, and within a year she had borne me a son. We were much of each other, and talked ourselves very close together. My faithful friend she became and has been always, and for a time we were passionate lovers. Always she has loved me and kept my soul full of tender gratitude and love for her, always when we meet our hands and eyes give friendly greeting, all through our lives from that hour we have been each other's secure help and refuge, each other's ungrudging fulcrum of help and sweetly frank and open speech. And after a little while my love and desire for Nettie returned as though it had never faded away.

No one will have difficulty now in understanding how that could be, but in the old

days of the world-makers that would have been held to be the most impossible thing. I should have had to crush that second love out of my thoughts, to have kept it secret from Anna, to have lied about it to all the world. The old-world theory was, there was only one love—we who fast upon a son of love find that hard to understand. The whole nature of a man was supposed to go out to the one girl or woman who possessed him, her whole nature to go out to him. Nothing was left over—it was a decreed-able thing to have any overplus at all. They formed a secret secluded system of two—two and such children as the born have. All other women he was held bound to find no beauty in, no sweetness, no interest, and she likewise, all other men. The old-time man and woman went apart in couples, into delicate little houses, like houses into little pits, and in these "houses" they sat down purposing to love, but really coming very soon to jealous watching of this extravagant mutual proprietaryship. All freshness passed very speedily out of their love, out of their conversation, all pride out of their common life. To permit such other freedom was blank dishonor. That I and Anna should live, and after our love-journey together go about our separate lives and dine at the public tables until the advent of her motherhood, would have seemed a terrible strain upon our loyalty. And that I should have it in me to go on loving Nettie—who lived in different manner both Verrill and me—would have outraged the very quintessence of the old convention.

In the old days love was a cruel, proprietary thing. But now Anna could let Nettie live in the world of my mind as freely as a man will suffer the presence of what he loves. If I could hear notes that were not in her compass she was glad, because she loved me, that I should listen to other music than hers. And she, too, could see the beauty of Nettie. Life is so rich and generous now, giving friendship and a thousand tender interests and helps and comforts, that no one shuts another off the full realization of all possibilities of beauty. For me from the beginning Nettie was the figure of beauty, the shape and color of the divine principle that lights the world. For everyone there are certain types, certain faces and forms, gestures, voices, and intonations that have that acceptable, unanalyzable quality. These come through the crowd of kindly,

friendly fellow-man and woman—our own. These touch one mysteriously, stir depths that must otherwise slumber, perceive and interpret the world. To refuse this interpretation is to refuse the sun, to darken and deaden all life. I loved Nettle, I loved all who were like her, in the measure that they were like her, in voice, or eyes, or form, or smile. And between my wife and me there was no bitterness that the great goddess, the life-giver, Aphrodite, Queen of the Loving Seas, came to my imagination as. It quickened our mutual love not at all, since now in our changed world love is sustained, it is a golden net about our globe that nets all humanity together.

I thought of Nettle much, and always most fittingly beautiful things restored me to her, all fine music, all pure deep color, all tender and solemn things. The stars were hers, and the mystery of moonlight; the sun the more in her hair, powdered finely, beamed into gleams and threads of sunlight in the wings and strands of her hair. Then suddenly one day a letter came to me from her, in her unaltered clear handwriting, but in a new language of expression, telling me many things. She had learned of my mother's death, and the thought of me had grown as strong as to pierce the silence I had imposed on her. We wrote to each of her—like common friends with a certain restraint between us at first, and with a great longing to see her

once more arising in my heart. For a time I felt that hunger unexpressed, and then I was moved to tell it to her. And so on New Year's Day in the Year Four, she came to Lowchester and me. How I remember that coming, across the gulf of fifty years! I went out across the park to meet her, so that we should meet alone. The winless morning was very clear and cold, the ground now-carpeted with snow, and all the trees a motionless lace and glint of frosty crystals. The rising sun had touched the white with a spirit of gold, and my heart beat and sang within me. I remember now the snowy shoulder of the dunes, south against the bright blue sky. And presently I saw the woman I loved coming through the white still trees.

I had made a goddess of Nettle, and behold she was a fellow-creature! She came, warm-wrapped and tremulous, to me, with the tender promise of tears in her eyes, with her hands outstretched and that dear smile quivering upon her lips. She stepped out of the dress I had made of her, a thing of needs and regrets and human kindness. Her hands as I took them were a little cold. The goddess shone through her indeed, glowed in all her body, she was a wonderful temple of love for me, but I could feel, like a thing now discovered, the texture and sinews of her living, her dear personal and mortal, hands.

## EPilogue

### THE WINDOW OF THE TOWER

This was as much as this pleasant-looking, gray-haired man had written. I had been lost in his story throughout the earlier portions of it, forgetful of the writer and his gracious room, and the high tower in which he was sitting. But gradually, as I drew near the end, the sense of strangeness returned to me. It was more and more evident to me that this was a different humanity from any I had known, unusual, having different customs, different beliefs, different interpretations, different emotions. It was no mere change in conditions and institutions the comet had wrought. It had made a change of heart and mind. In a manner it had debauched the world, robbed it of its spirit, its little intense jealousies, its inconsistencies, its humor. At the end, and particularly after the death of his mother, I felt his story had slipped away from my sympathies altogether. These Britons from had buried something in him that worked living still and unobdured in me, that rebelled in particular at that return of Nettle. I became a little impatient. I no longer felt with him, nor gathered a sense of complete understanding from his phrases. His Lord Erse indeed! He and these transfigured people—they were beautiful and noble people, like the people one sees in great pictures, like the gods of noble sculptures, but they had no nearer fellowship than those to men. As the change was realized, with every stage of realization the gulf widened and it was harder to follow his words.

I put down the last fascicle of all, and met his friendly eyes. It was hard to dislike him.



I felt a subtle embarrassment in putting the question that perplexed me. And yet it seemed so material to me I had to put it. "And did you——?" I asked. "Were you——lovers?"

His eyebrows rose. "Of course."

"But your wife——?"

It was manifest he did not understand me.

I hesitated still more. I was perplexed by a conviction of baseness. "But——" I began. "You remained lovers?"

"Yes." I had grave doubts if I understood him, or he me.

I made a still more courageous attempt. "And had Nettie no other lovers?"

"A beautiful woman like that! I know not how many loved beauty in her, nor what she found in others. But we hear from that time were very close; you understand, we were friends, helpers, personal lovers in a world of lovers."

"Four?"

"There was Verrill."

Then suddenly it came to me that the thoughts that stirred in my mind were sinister and base, that the queer suspicions, the coarseness and coarse jealousy of my old world were over and done for these more finely living souls. "You made," I said, trying to be liberal minded, "a home together?"

"A home?" He looked at me, and, I know not why, I glanced down at my feet. What a chance, ill-made thing a foot is, and how hard and clumsy seemed my clothing! How harshly I stood out amidst these fine, perfected things. I had a moment of ridiculous detestation. I wanted to get out of all this. After all, it wasn't my style. I wanted intensely to say something that would bring him down a peg, make sure, as it were, of my suspicions by launching an offensive accusation. I looked up and he was standing.

"I forgot," he said. "You are pretending the old world is still going on. A home?"

He put out his hand, and quite noticeably the great window widened down to us, and the splendid nearer prospect of that dreamland city was before us. There for one clear moment I saw it, its galleries and open spaces, its trees of golden fruit and crystal water, its music and unjoking, low and beauty without ceasing flowing through its varied and intricate streets. And the newer people I saw were directly and plainly, and no longer in the distancing mirror that hung overhead. They really did not justify my suspicions, and yet——! They were such people as one sees on earth here that they were choiced. How can I express that change? As a woman is changed in the eyes of her lover, as a woman is changed by the loss of a lover, they were choiced.

I stood up beside him and looked out. I was a little flushed, my ears a little reddened, by the inconsequence of my curiosities, and by my uneasy sense of profound moral difference. He was taller than I.

"This is our home," he said, smiling, and with thoughtful eyes on me.

(The End.)

## Who Knows?

By CATHERINE MARGRAM

Those cryptic ruses upon the brake web thick,  
Who will interpret? or that moss-ditch  
The cricket till the night with, who is wise  
To give it worth? And when the night-wind flies,  
Who has the delicate ear that can divine  
The auguries of the over-whispering pine?  
Or can declare the news the white lilies bring  
When shores send out their ancient summoning?